DOUBLE ISSUE

OCTOBER 1993

ELLERY QUEEN

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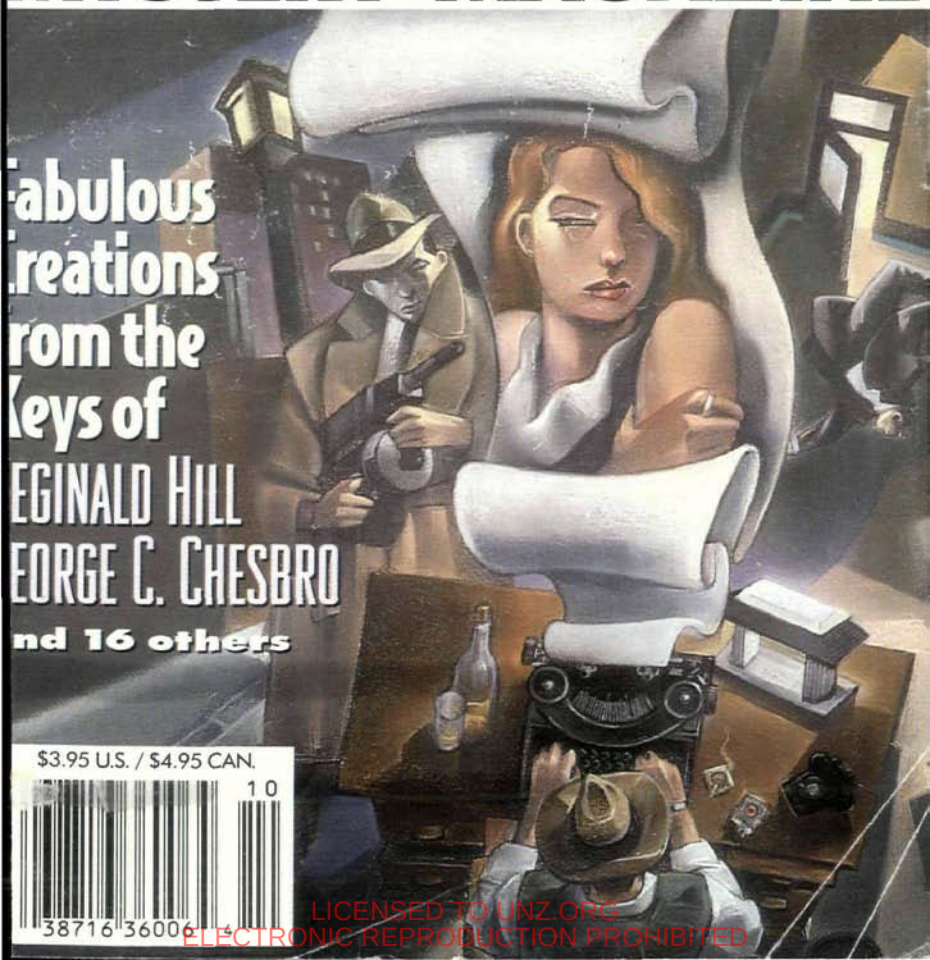
MYSTERY MAGAZINE



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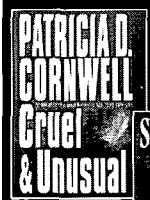

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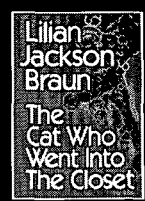

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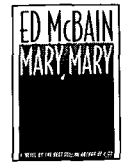

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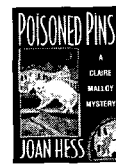

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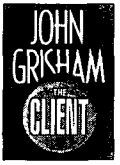

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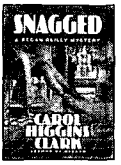

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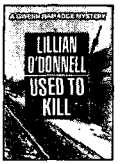

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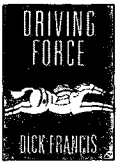

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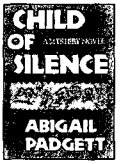

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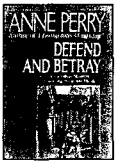

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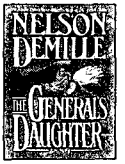

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Contents

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MYSTERY MAGAZINE®

Castle Dangerous	Ian Rankin	5
Never Knew He Had It in Him	Simon Winchester	24
Haunts	George C. Chesbro	38
Spy at Sea	Edward D. Hoch	57
The Jury Box	Jon L. Breen	76
Groundhog	Bennie Lee Sinclair	79
A Script for the President	William Bankier	83
The Haunted Dolls' House	M. R. James	99
Masks	Charles Ardai	111
Trial by Fire	Donald Olson	127
Muzza	Paul Horgan	136
Anomalies	Stephen Wasylyk	160

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Soul Sculpture	Mauricio-Jose Schwarz	**175**
All in the Eyes	Barbara Owens	**181**
No Connection	Suzanne Jones	**196**
Looking on the Bright Side	Betty Rowlands	**215**
The Real West	James A. Ritchie	**220**
Layover	Ed Gorman	**229**
One Small Step	Reginald Hill	**238**

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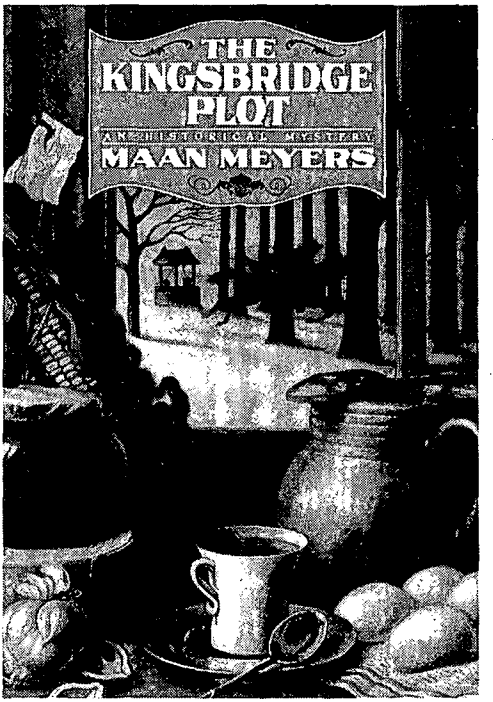

It's autumn in New York, 1775, and a light snow has begun to fall. But nobody is talking about the weather, least of all a tenacious young surgeon named John Peter Tonneman. A savagely dismembered body and a plot to assassinate General George Washington are the focus of everyone's attention, and Tonneman suspects the two are connected.

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Good news for fans of Ian Rankin's Inspector John Rebus: the latest Rebus novel, Strip Jack, *will soon be available in the U.S. from St. Martin's Press. Here's an outing for Rebus that the author says "takes a slightly tongue-in-cheek look at the relationship between American tourists and their British hosts. . . ."*

CASTLE DANGEROUS

by IAN RANKIN

Sir Walter Scott was dead.

He'd been found at the top of his namesake's monument in Princes Street Gardens, dead of a heart attack and with a new and powerful pair of binoculars hanging around his slender, mottled neck.

Sir Walter had been one of Edinburgh's most revered QCs until his retirement a year ago. Detective Inspector John Rebus, climbing the hundreds (surely it must be hundreds) of spiralling steps up to the top of the Scott Monument, paused for a moment to recall one or two of his run-ins with Sir Walter, both in and out of the courtrooms on the Royal Mile. He had been a formidable character, shrewd, devious, and subtle. Law to him had been a challenge rather than an obligation. To John Rebus, it was just a day's work.

Rebus ached as he reached the last incline. The steps here were narrower than ever, the spiral tighter. Room for one person only, really. At the height of its summer popularity, with a throng of tourists squeezing through it like toothpaste from a tube, Rebus reckoned the Scott Monument might be very scary indeed.

He breathed hard and loud bursting through the small doorway at the top, and stood there for a moment, catching his breath. The panorama before him was, quite simply, the best view in Edinburgh. The castle close behind him, the New Town spread out in front of him, sloping down towards the Firth of Forth, with Fife, Rebus's birthplace, visible in the distance. Calton Hill . . . Leith . . . Arthur's Seat . . . and round to the castle again. It was breathtaking, or would

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have been had the breath not already been taken from him by the climb.

The parapet upon which he stood was incredibly narrow; again, there was hardly room enough to squeeze past someone. How crowded did it get in the summer? Dangerously crowded? It seemed dangerously crowded just now, with only four people up here. He looked over the edge upon the sheer drop to the gardens below, where a massing of tourists, growing restless at being barred from the monument, stared up at him. Rebus shivered.

Not that it was cold. It was early June. Spring was finally late-blooming into summer, but that cold wind never left the city, that wind which never seemed to be warmed by the sun. It bit into Rebus now, reminding him that he lived in a northern climate. He looked down and saw Sir Walter's slumped body, reminding him why he was here.

"I thought we were going to have another corpse on our hands there for a minute." The speaker was Detective Sergeant Brian Holmes. He had been in conversation with the police doctor, who himself was crouching over the corpse.

"Just getting my breath back," Rebus explained.

"You should take up squash."

"It's squashed enough up here." The wind was nipping Rebus's ears. He began to wish he hadn't had that haircut at the weekend. "What have we got?"

"Heart attack. The doctor reckons he was due for one anyway. A climb like that in an excited state. One of the witnesses says he just doubled over. Didn't cry out, didn't seem in pain. . . ."

"Old mortality, eh?" Rebus looked wistfully at the corpse. "But why do you say he was excited?"

Holmes grinned. "Think I'd bring you up here for the good of your health? Here." He handed a polythene bag to Rebus. Inside the bag was a badly typed note. "It was found in the binocular case."

Rebus read the note through its clear polythene window: GO TO TOP OF SCOTT MONUMENT. TUESDAY MIDDAY. I'LL BE THERE. LOOK FOR THE GUN.

"The gun?" Rebus asked, frowning.

There was a sudden explosion. Rebus started, but Holmes just looked at his watch, then corrected its hands. One o'clock. The noise had come from the blank charge fired every day from the castle walls at precisely one o'clock.

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"The gun," Rebus repeated, except now it was a statement. Sir Walter's binoculars were lying beside him. Rebus lifted them—"He wouldn't mind, would he?"—and fixed them on the castle. Tourists could be seen walking around. Some peered over the walls. A few fixed their own binoculars on Rebus. One, an elderly Asian, grinned and waved. Rebus lowered the binoculars. He examined them. "These look brand new."

"Bought for the purpose, I'd say, sir."

"But what exactly *was* the purpose, Brian? What was he supposed to be looking at?" Rebus waited for an answer. None was forthcoming. "Whatever it was," Rebus went on, "it as good as killed him. I suggest we take a look for ourselves."

"Where, sir?"

Rebus nodded towards the castle. "Over there, Brian. Come on."

"Er, Inspector . . . ?" Rebus looked towards the doctor, who was upright now, but pointing downwards with one finger. "How are we going to get him down?"

Rebus stared at Sir Walter. Yes, he could see the problem. It would be hard graft taking him all the way back down the spiral stairs. What's more, damage to the body would be unavoidable. He supposed they could always use a winch and lower him straight to the ground. . . . Well, it was a job for ambulancemen or undertakers, not the police. Rebus patted the doctor's shoulder.

"You're in charge, Doc," he said, exiting through the door before the doctor could summon up a protest. Holmes shrugged apologetically, smiled, and followed Rebus into the dark. The doctor looked at the body, then over the edge, then back to the body again. He reached into his pocket for a mint, popped it into his mouth, and began to crunch on it. Then he, too, made for the door.

Splendour was falling on the castle walls. Wrong poet, Rebus mused, but right image. He tried to recall if he'd ever read any Scott, but drew a blank. He thought he might have picked up *Waverley* once. As a colleague at the time had said, "Imagine calling a book after the station." Rebus hadn't bothered to explain; and hadn't read the book either, or if he had it had left no impression. . . .

He stood now on the ramparts, looking across to the Gothic exaggeration of the Scott Monument. A cannon was almost immediately behind him. Anyone wanting to be seen from the top of the monument would probably have been standing right on this spot. People did not linger here though. They might wander along the walls,

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take a few photographs, or pose for a few, but they would not stand in the one spot for longer than a minute or two.

Which meant, of course, that if someone *had* been standing here longer, they would be conspicuous. The problem was twofold: first, conspicuous to whom? Everyone else would be in motion, would not notice that someone was lingering. Second, all the potential witnesses would by now have gone their separate ways, in tour buses or on foot, down the Royal Mile or onto Princes Street, along George the Fourth Bridge to look at Greyfriars Bobby. . . . The people milling around just now represented a fresh intake, new water flowing down the same old stream.

Someone wanted to be seen by Sir Walter, and Sir Walter wanted to see him—hence the binoculars. No conversation was needed, just the sighting. Why? Rebus couldn't think of a single reason. He turned away from the wall and saw Holmes approaching. Meeting his eyes, Holmes shrugged his shoulders.

"I've talked to the guards on the gate. They don't remember seeing anyone suspicious. As one of them said, 'All these bloody tourists look the same to me.' "

Rebus smiled at this, but then someone was tugging at his sleeve, a small handbagged woman with sunglasses and thick lipstick.

"Sorry, could I ask you to move over a bit?" Her accent was American, her voice a nasal sing-song. "Lawrence wants a picture of me with that gorgeous skyline behind me."

Rebus smiled at her, even made a slight bow, and moved a couple of yards out of the way, Holmes following suit.

"Thanks!" Lawrence called from behind his camera, freeing a hand so that he could wave it towards them. Rebus noticed that the man wore a yellow sticker on his chest. He looked back to the woman, now posing like the film star she so clearly wasn't, and saw that she too had a badge, her name—Diana—felt-tipped beneath some package company's logo.

"I wonder . . ." Rebus said quietly.

"Sir?"

"Maybe you were asking the wrong question at the gate, Brian. Yes, the right idea but the wrong question. Come on, let's go back and ask again. We'll see how eagle-eyed our friends really are."

They passed the photographer—his badge called him Larry rather than Lawrence—just as the shutter clicked.

"Great," he said to nobody in particular. "Just one more, sweetheart." As he wound the film, Rebus paused and stood beside him,

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then made a square from the thumb and forefinger of both hands and peered through it towards the woman Diana, as though assessing the composition of the picture. Larry caught the gesture.

"You a professional?" he asked, his tone just short of awe.

"Only in a manner of speaking, Larry," said Rebus, turning away again. Holmes was left standing there, staring at the photographer. He wondered whether to shrug and smile again, as he had done with the doctor. What the hell. He shrugged. He smiled. And he followed Rebus towards the gate.

Rebus went alone to the home of Sir Walter Scott, just off the Corstorphione Road near the zoo. As he stepped out of his car, he could have sworn he detected a faint wafting of animal dung. There was another car in the driveway, one which, with a sinking heart, he recognised. As he walked up to the front door of the house, he saw that the curtains were closed in the upstairs windows, while downstairs, painted wooden shutters had been pulled across to block out the daylight.

The door was opened by Superintendent "Farmer" Watson.

"I thought that was your car, sir," Rebus said as Watson ushered him into the hall. When he spoke, the superintendent's voice was a whispered growl.

"He's still up there, you know."

"Who?"

"Sir Walter, of course!" Flecks of saliva burst from the corners of Watson's mouth. Rebus thought it judicious to show not even the mildest amusement.

"I left the doctor in charge."

"Dr. Jameson couldn't organise a brewery visit. What the hell did you think you were doing?"

"I had . . . *have* an investigation on my hands, sir. I thought I could be more usefully employed than playing undertaker."

"He's stiff now, you know," Watson said, his anger having diminished. He didn't exactly know why it was that he could never stay angry with Rebus; there was something about the man. "They don't think they can get him down the stairs. They've tried twice, but he got stuck both times."

Rebus pursed his lips, the only way he could prevent them spreading into a wide grin. Watson saw this and saw, too, that the situation was not without a trace of humour.

"Is that why you're here, sir? Placating the widow?"

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"No, I'm here on a personal level. Sir Walter and Lady Scott were friends of mine. That is, Sir Walter was, and Lady Scott still is."

Rebus nodded slowly. Christ, he was thinking, the poor bugger's only been dead a couple of hours and here's old Farmer Watson already trying to . . . But no, surely not. Watson was many things, but not callous, not like that. Rebus rebuked himself silently, and in so doing missed most of what Watson was saying.

"—in here."

And a door from the hallway was being opened. Rebus was being shown into a spacious living room—or were they called drawing rooms in houses like this? Walking across to where Lady Scott sat by the fireside was like walking across a dance hall.

"This is Inspector Rebus," Watson was saying. "One of my men."

Lady Scott looked up from her handkerchief. "How do you do?" She offered him a delicate hand, which he lightly touched with his own, in place of his usual firm handshake. Lady Scott was in her mid fifties, a well-preserved monument of neat lines and precise movements. Rebus had seen her accompanying her husband to various functions in the city, had come across her photograph in the paper when he had received his knighthood. He saw, too, from the corner of his eye, the way Watson looked at her, a mixture of pity and something more than pity, as though he wanted at the same time to pat her hand and hug her to him.

Who would want Sir Walter dead? That was, in a sense, what he had come here to ask. Still, the question itself was valid. Rebus could think of adversaries—those Scott had crossed in his professional life, those he had helped put behind bars, those, perhaps, who resented everything from his title to the bright blue socks that had become something of a trademark after he admitted on a radio show that he wore no other colour on his feet. . . .

"Lady Scott, I'm sorry to intrude on you at a time like this. I know it's difficult, but there are a couple of questions . . ."

"Please, ask your questions." She gestured for him to sit on the sofa—the sofa on which Farmer Watson had already made himself comfortable. Rebus sat down awkwardly. This whole business was awkward. He knew the chess player's motto: if in doubt, play a pawn. Or as the Scots themselves would say, ca' canny. But that had never been his style, and he couldn't change now. As ever, he decided to sacrifice his queen.

"We found a note in Sir Walter's binocular case."

"He didn't own a pair of binoculars." Her voice was firm.

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"He probably bought them this morning. Did he say where he was going?"

"No, just out. I was upstairs. He called that he was 'popping out for an hour or two,' and that was all."

"What note?" This from Watson. What note indeed. Rebus wondered why Lady Scott hadn't asked the same thing.

"A typed note, telling Sir Walter to be at the top of the Scott Monument at midday." Rebus paused, his attention wholly on Sir Walter's widow. "There have been others, haven't there? Other notes?"

She nodded slowly. "Yes. I found them by accident. I wasn't prying, I'm not like that. I was in Walter's office—he always called it that, his 'office,' never his study—looking for something, an old newspaper I think. Yes, there was an article I wanted to reread, and I'd searched high and low for the blessed paper. I was looking in Walter's office, and I found some . . . letters." She wrinkled her nose. "He'd kept them quiet from me. Well, I suppose he had his reasons. I never said anything to him about finding them." She smiled ruefully. "I used to think sometimes that the unsaid was what kept our marriage alive. That may seem cruel. Now he's gone, I wish we'd told one another more. . . ."

She dabbed at a liquid eye with the corner of her handkerchief, wrapped as it was around one finger, her free hand twisting and twisting the corners. To Rebus, it looked as if she were using it as a tourniquet.

"Do you know where these other notes are?" he asked.

"I don't know. Walter may have moved them."

"Shall we see?"

The office was untidy in the best legal tradition: any available flat surface, including the carpet, seemed to be fair game for stacks of brown folders tied with ribbon, huge bulging manilla envelopes, magazines and newspapers, books and learned journals. Two walls consisted entirely of bookcases, from floor to near the ornate but flaking ceiling. One bookcase, glass-fronted, contained what Rebus reckoned must be the collected works of the other Sir Walter Scott. The glass doors looked as though they hadn't been opened in a decade; the books themselves might never have been read. Still, it was a nice touch—to have one's study so thoroughly infiltrated by one's namesake.

"Ah, they're still here." Lady Scott had slid a concertina-style folder out from beneath a pile of similar such files. "Shall we take

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them back through to the morning room?" She looked around her. "I don't like it in here . . . not now."

Her Edinburgh accent, with its drawn vowels, had turned "morning" into "mourning." Either that, thought Rebus, or she'd said "mourning room" in the first place. He would have liked to have stayed a little longer in Sir Walter's office, but was compelled to follow. Back in her chair, Lady Scott untied the ribbon around the file and let it fall open. The file itself was made up of a dozen or more compartments, but only one seemed to contain any paperwork. She pulled out the letters and handed them to Watson, who glanced through them wordlessly before handing them to Rebus.

Sir Walter had taken each note from its envelope, but had paperclipped the envelopes to the backs of their respective notes. So Rebus was able to ascertain that the notes had been posted between three weeks and one week ago, and all bore a central London postmark. He read the three notes slowly to himself, then reread them. The first came quickly to its point.

I ENCLOSE A LETTER. THERE ARE PLENTY MORE WHERE IT CAME FROM. YOU WILL HEAR FROM ME AGAIN.

The second fleshed out the blackmail.

I HAVE ELEVEN MORE LETTERS. IF YOU'D LIKE THEM BACK, THEY WILL COST £2,000. GET THE MONEY.

The third, posted a week ago, finalised things.

PUT THE MONEY IN A CARRIER BAG. GO TO THE CAFE ROYAL AT 9 P.M. FRIDAY. STAND AT THE BAR AND HAVE A DRINK. LEAVE THE BAG THERE AND GO MAKE A PHONE CALL. SPEND TWO MINUTES AWAY FROM THE BAR. WHEN YOU COME BACK, THE LETTERS WILL BE THERE.

Rebus looked up at Lady Scott. "Did he pay?"

"I've really no idea."

"But you could check?"

"If you like, yes."

Rebus nodded. "I'd like to be sure." The first note said that a letter was enclosed, obviously a letter concerning Sir Walter—but what kind of letter? Of the letter itself there was no sign. Twelve apparently incriminating or embarrassing letters for £2,000. A small price to pay for someone of Sir Walter's position in society. What's more, it seemed to Rebus a small price to *ask*. And if the exchange had taken place as arranged, what was the point of the last note, the one found in Sir Walter's binocular case? Yes, that was a point.

"Did you see the mail this morning, Lady Scott?"

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"I was first to the door, yes."

"And was there an envelope like these others?"

"I'm sure there wasn't."

Rebus nodded. "Yes, if there had been, I think Sir Walter would have kept it, judging by these." He shook the notes—all with envelopes attached.

"Meaning, John?" Superintendent Watson sounded puzzled. To Rebus's ears, it was his natural voice.

"Meaning," he explained, "that the last note, the one we found on Sir Walter, was as it arrived at the house. No envelope. It must have been pushed through the letter box. I'd say sometime yesterday or this morning. The blackmail started in London, but the blackmailer came up here for the payoff. And he or she is still here—or was until midday. Now, I'm not so certain. If Sir Walter paid the money—" he nodded towards Lady Scott "—and I *would* like you to check on that, please, today if possible. *If,* as I say, Sir Walter paid, *if* he got the letters back, then what was this morning's little game all about?"

Watson nodded, arms folded, looking down into his lap as though seeking answers. Rebus doubted they'd be found so close to home. He rose to his feet.

"We could do with finding those letters, too. Perhaps, Lady Scott, you might have another look in your husband's . . . office."

She nodded slowly. "I should tell you, Inspector, that I'm not sure I *want* to find them."

"I can understand that. But it would help us track down the blackmailer."

Her voice was as low as the light in the room. "Yes, of course."

"And in the meantime, John?" Watson tried to sound like a man in charge of something. But there was a pleading edge to his voice.

"Meantime," said Rebus, "I'll be at the Castellain Hotel. The number will be in the book. You can always have me paged."

Watson gave Rebus one of his dark looks, the kind that said: I don't know what you're up to, but I can't let anyone else know that I *don't* know. Then he nodded and almost smiled.

"Of course," he said. "Yes, off you go. I may stay on a little longer. . . ." He looked to Lady Scott for her assent. But she was busy with the handkerchief again, twisting and twisting and twisting. . . .

The Castellain Hotel, a minute's walk from Princes Street, was a chaos of tourists. The large pot-planted lobby looked as though it

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was on someone's tour itinerary, with one large organised party about to leave, milling about as their luggage was taken out to the waiting bus by hard-pressed porters. At the same time, another party was arriving, the holiday company's representative conspicuous by being the only person who looked like he knew what was going on.

Seeing that a group was about to leave, Rebus panicked. But their lapel badges assured him that they were part of the Seascape Tours package. He walked up to the reception desk and waited while a harassed young woman in tartan two-piece tried to take two telephone calls at the same time. She showed no little skill in the operation, and all the time she was talking her eyes were on the scrum of guests in front of her. Finally, she found a moment and a welcoming smile for him. Funny how at this time of year there were so many smiles to be found in Edinburgh. . . .

"Yes, sir?"

"Detective Inspector Rebus," he announced. "I'd like a word with the Grebe Tours rep if she's around."

"She's a he," the receptionist explained. "I think he might be in his room, hold on and I'll check." She had picked up the telephone. "Nothing wrong, is there?"

"No, nothing, just want a word, that's all."

Her call was answered quickly. "Hello, Tony? There's a gentleman in reception to see you." Pause. "Fine, I'll tell him. 'Bye." She put down the receiver. "He'll be down in a minute."

Rebus nodded his thanks and, as she answered another telephone call, moved back into the reception hall, dodging the bags and the worried owners of the bags. There was something thrilling about holidaymakers. They were like children at a party. But at the same time there was something depressing, too, about the herd mentality. Rebus had never been on a package holiday in his life. He mistrusted the production-line cheerfulness of the reps and the guides. A walk along a deserted beach: now *that* was a holiday. Finding a pleasant out-of-the-way pub . . . playing pinball so ruthlessly that the machine "tilted" . . . wasn't he due for a holiday himself?

Not that he would take one: the loneliness could be a cage as well as a release. But he would never, he hoped, be as caged as these people around him. He looked for a Grebe Tours badge on any passing lapel or chest, but saw none. The Edinburgh Castle gatekeepers had been eagle-eyed all right, or one of them had. He not only recalled that a Grebe Tours bus had pulled in to the car park at

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around half-past eleven that morning, but also that the rep had mentioned where the tour party was staying—the Castellain Hotel.

A small, balding man came out of the lift and fairly trotted to the reception desk, then, when the receptionist pointed towards Rebus, trotted over towards him, too. Did these reps take pills? potions? laughing gas? How the hell did they manage to keep it up?

"Tony Bell at your service," the small man said. They shook hands. Rebus noticed that Tony Bell was growing old. He had a swelling paunch and was a little breathless after his jog. He ran a hand over his babylike head and kept grinning.

"Detective Inspector Rebus." The grin subsided. In fact, most of Tony Bell's face seemed to subside.

"Oh Jesus," he said, "what is it? A mugger, pickpocket, what? Is somebody hurt? Which hospital?"

Rebus raised a hand. "No need to panic," he reassured him. "Your charges are all quite safe."

"Thank Christ for that." The grin returned. Bell nodded towards a door, above which was printed the legend Dining Room and Bar. "Fancy a drink?"

"Anything to get out of this war zone," Rebus said.

"You should see the bar after dinner," said Tony Bell, leading the way, "now *that's* a war zone. . . ."

As Bell explained, the Grebe Tours party had a free afternoon. He checked his watch and told Rebus that they would probably start returning to the hotel fairly soon. There was a meeting arranged for before dinner, when the next day's itinerary would be discussed. Rebus told the rep what he wanted, and Bell himself suggested he stay put for the meeting. Yes, Rebus agreed, that seemed sensible, and meantime would Tony like another drink?

This particular Grebe Tours party was American. They'd flown in almost a month ago for what Bell called the "Full British Tour"—Canterbury, Salisbury, Stonehenge, London, Stratford, York, the Lake District, Trossachs, Highlands, and Edinburgh.

"This is just about the last stop," he said. "For which relief much thanks, I can tell you. They're nice people mind, I'm not saying they're not, but . . . demanding. Yes, that's what it is. If a Brit doesn't quite understand what's been said to him, or if something isn't *quite* right, or whatever, they tend to keep their gobs shut. But Americans . . ." He rolled his eyeballs. "Americans," he repeated, as though it explained all.

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It did. Less than an hour later, Rebus was addressing a packed, seated crowd of forty American tourists in a room off the large dining room. He had barely given them his rank when a hand shot into the air.

"Er . . . yes?"

The elderly woman stood up. "Sir, are you from Scotland Yard?"

Rebus shook his head. "Scotland Yard's in London."

She was still standing. "Now why is that?" she asked. Rebus had no answer to this, but someone else suggested that it was because that part of London was called Scotland Yard. Yes, but why was it called Scotland Yard in the first place? The woman had sat down now, but all around her was discussion and conjecture. Rebus looked towards Tony Bell, who rose from his own seat and succeeded in quietening things down.

Eventually, Rebus was able to make his point. "We're interested," he said, "in a visitor to Edinburgh Castle this morning. You may have seen someone while you were there, someone standing by the walls, looking towards the Scott Monument. He or she might have been standing there for some time. If that means something to anybody, I'd like you to tell me about it. At the same time, it's possible that those of you who took photographs of your visit may have by chance snapped the person we're looking for. If any of you have cameras, I'd like to see the photos you took this morning."

He was in luck. Nobody remembered seeing anyone suspicious—they were too busy looking at the sights. But two photographers had used Polaroids, and another had taken his film into a same-day processor at lunchtime and so had the glossy photographs with him. Rebus studied these while Tony Bell went over the next day's arrangements with the group. The Polaroid photos were badly taken, often blurry, with people in the background reduced to matchstick men. But the same-day photos were excellent, sharply focused thirty-five-millimetre jobs. As the tour party left the room, en route for dinner, Tony Bell came over to where Rebus was sitting and asked the question he knew he himself would be asked more than once over dinner.

"Any joy?"

"Maybe," Rebus admitted. "These two people keep cropping up." He spread five photographs out in front of him. In two, a middle-aged woman was caught in the background, staring out over the wall she was leaning on. Leaning on, or hiding behind? In another two, a man in his late twenties or early thirties stood in similar

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pose, but with a more upright stance. In one photo, they could both be seen half-turning with smiles on their faces towards the camera.

"No." Tony Bell was shaking his head. "They might look like wanted criminals, but they're in our party. I think Mrs. Eglinton was sitting in the back row near the door, beside her husband. You probably didn't see her. But Shaw Berkely was in the second row, over to one side. I'm surprised you didn't see him. Actually, I take that back. He has this gift of being innocuous. Never asks questions or complains. Mind you, I think he's seen most of this before."

"Oh?" Rebus was gathering the photos together.

"He told me he'd been to Britain before on holiday."

"And there's nothing between him and—?" Rebus was pointing to the photograph of man and woman together.

"Him and Mrs. Eglinton?" Bell seemed genuinely amused. "I don't know—maybe. She certainly mothers him a bit."

Rebus was still studying the print. "Is he the youngest person on the tour?"

"By about ten years. Sad story really. His mother died, and after the funeral he said he just had to get away. Went into the travel agent's and we were offering a reduction for late bookings."

"His father's dead too, then?"

"That's right. I got his life story one night late in the bar. On a tour, I get everyone's story sooner or later."

Rebus flipped through the sheaf of photos a final time. Nothing new presented itself to him. "And you were at the castle between about half-past eleven and quarter to one?"

"Just as I told you."

"Oh well." Rebus sighed. "I don't think—"

"Inspector?" It was the receptionist, her head peering around the door. "There's a call for you."

It was Superintendent Watson. He was concise, factual. "Withdrew five hundred pounds from each of four accounts, all on the same day, and in plenty of time for the rendezvous at the Cafe Royal."

"So presumably he paid up."

"But did he get the letters back?"

"Mmm. Has Lady Scott had a look for them?"

"Yes, we've been through the study—not thoroughly, there's too much stuff in there for that. But we've had a look." That "we" sounded comfortable, sounded as though Watson had already got his feet under the table. "So what now, John?"

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"I'm coming over, if you've no objection, sir. With respect, I'd like a look at Sir Walter's office for myself. . . ."

He went in search of Tony Bell, just so he could say thanks and goodbye. But he wasn't in the musty conference room, and he wasn't in the dining room. He was in the bar, standing with one foot on the bar rail as he shared a joke with the woman he had called Mrs. Eglinton. Rebus did not interrupt, but he did wink at the phone-bound receptionist as he passed her, then pushed his way out of the Castellain Hotel's double doors just as the wheezing of a bus's air brakes signalled the arrival of yet more cargo.

There was no overhead lighting in Sir Walter Scott's study, but there were numerous floor lamps, desk lamps, and angle-poises. Rebus switched on as many as worked. Most were antiquated, with wiring to match, but there was one newish angle-poise attached to the bookcase, pointing inwards towards the collection of Scott's writings. There was a comfortable chair beside this lamp, and an ashtray on the floor between chair and bookcase.

When Watson put his head around the door, Rebus was seated in this chair, elbows resting on his knees, and chin resting between the cupped palms of both hands.

"Margaret—that is, Lady Scott—she wondered if you wanted anything."

"I want those letters."

"I think she meant something feasible—like tea or coffee."

Rebus shook his head. "Maybe later, sir."

Watson nodded, made to retreat, then thought of something. "They got him down in the end. Had to use a winch. Not very dignified, but what can you do? I just hope the papers don't print any pictures."

"Why don't you have a word with the editors, just to be on the safe side?"

"I might just do that, John." Watson nodded. "Yes, I might just do that."

Alone again, Rebus rose from his chair and opened the glass doors of the bookcase. The position of chair, ashtray, and lamp was interesting. It was as though Sir Walter had been reading volumes from these shelves, from his namesake's collected works. Rebus ran a finger over the spines. A few he had heard of; the vast majority he had not. One was titled *Castle Dangerous*. He smiled grimly at that. Dangerous, all right; or in Sir Walter's case, quite lethal. He angled

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the light farther into the bookcase. The dust on a row of books had been disturbed. Rebus pushed with one finger against the spine of a volume, and the book slid a good two inches back until it rested against the solid wall behind the bookcase. Two uniform inches of space for the whole of this row. Rebus reached a hand down behind the row of books and ran it along the shelf. He met resistance, and drew the hand out again, now clutching a sheaf of papers. Sir Walter had probably thought it as good a hiding place as any—a poor testament to Scott the novelist's powers of attraction. Rebus sat down in the chair again, brought the angle-poise closer, and began to sift through what he'd found.

There were, indeed, twelve letters, ornately fountain-penned promises of love with honour, of passion until doomsday. As with all such youthful nonsense, there was a lot of poetry and classical imagery. Rebus imagined it was standard private boys' school stuff, even today. But these letters had been written half a century ago, sent from one schoolboy to another a year younger than himself. The younger boy was Sir Walter, and from the correspondence it was clear that Sir Walter's feelings for the writer had been every bit as inflamed as those of the writer himself.

Ah, the writer. Rebus tried to remember if he was still an MP. He had the feeling he had either lost his seat, or else had retired. Maybe he was still on the go; Rebus paid little attention to politics. His attitude had always been: don't vote, it only encourages them. So, here was the presumed scandal. Hardly a scandal, but just about enough to cause embarrassment. At worst a humiliation. But then Rebus was beginning to suspect that humiliation, not financial profit, was the price exacted here.

And not even necessarily public humiliation, merely the private knowledge that someone knew of these letters, that someone had possessed them. Then the final taunt, the taunt Sir Walter could not resist: come to the Scott Monument, look across to the castle, and you will see who has been tormenting you these past weeks. You will know.

But now that same taunt was working on Rebus. He knew so much, yet in effect he knew nothing at all. He now possessed the "what," but not the "who." And what should he do with the old love letters? Lady Scott had said she wasn't sure she wanted to find them. He could take them away with him—destroy them. Or he could hand them over to her, tell her what they were. It would be up to her either to destroy them unread or to discover this silly secret. He

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could always say: It's all right, it's nothing really. . . . Mind you, some of the sentences were ambiguous enough to disturb, weren't they? Rebus read again. "When you scored 50 n.o. and afterwards we showered . . ." "When you stroke me like that . . ." "After rugger practice . . ."

Ach. He got up and opened the bookcase again. He would replace them. Let time deal with them; he could not. But in placing his hand back down behind the line of books, he brushed against something else, not paper but stiff card. He hadn't noticed it before because it seemed stuck to the wall. He peeled it carefully away and brought it into the light. It was a photograph, black and white, ten inches by eight and mounted on card. A man and woman on an esplanade, arm in arm, posing for the photographer. The man looked a little pensive, trying to smile but not sure he actually wanted to be caught like this. The woman seemed to wrap both her arms round one of his, restraining him; and she was laughing, thrilled by this moment, thrilled to be with him.

The man was Sir Walter. A Sir Walter twenty years older than the schoolboy of the love letters, mid thirties perhaps. And the woman? Rebus stared long and hard at the woman. Put the photograph down and paced the study, touching things, peering through the shutters. He was thinking and not thinking. He had seen the woman before somewhere . . . but where? She was not Lady Scott, of that he was certain. But he'd seen her recently, seen that face . . . that face.

And then he knew. Oh yes, he knew.

He telephoned the Castellain, half-listening as the story was given to him. Taken ill suddenly . . . poorly . . . decided to go home . . . airport . . . flying to London and catching a connection tonight. . . . Was there a problem? Well, of course there was a problem, but no one at the hotel could help with it, not now. The blackmail over, Rebus himself had inadvertently caused the blackmailer to flee. He had gone to the hotel hoping—such a slim hope—for help, not realising that one of the Grebe Tours party was his quarry. Once again, he had sacrificed his queen too early in the game.

He telephoned Edinburgh Airport, only to be told that the flight had already taken off. He asked to be rerouted to Security, and asked them for the name of the security chief at Heathrow. He was calling Heathrow when Watson appeared in the hall.

"Making quite a few calls, aren't you, John? Not personal, I hope."

Rebus ignored his superior as his call was connected. "Mr. Masterson in Security, please," he said. And then: "Yes, it is urgent. I'll

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hold." He turned to Watson at last. "Oh, it's personal all right, sir. But it's nothing to do with me. I'll tell you all about it in a minute. Then we can decide what to tell Lady Scott. Actually, seeing as you're a friend of the family and all, *you* can tell her. That'd be best, wouldn't it, sir? There are some things only your friends can tell you, after all, aren't there?"

He was through to Heathrow Security, and turned away from Watson the better to talk with them. The superintendent stood there, dimly aware that Rebus was going to force him to tell Margaret something she would probably rather not hear. He wondered if she would ever again have time for the person who would tell her . . . ? And he cursed John Rebus, who was so good at digging yet never seemed to soil his own hands. It was a gift, a terrible, destructive gift. Watson, a staunch believer in the Christian God, doubted Rebus's gift had come down from on high. No, not from on high.

The phone call was ending. Rebus put down the receiver and nodded towards Sir Walter's study.

"If you'll step into the office, sir," he said, "there's something I'd like to show you. . . ."

Shaw Berkely was arrested at Heathrow, and despite protestations regarding his health and cries for consular aid, was escorted back to Edinburgh, where Rebus was waiting, brisk and definitive, in Interview Room A of Great London Road Police Station.

Berkely's mother had died two months before. She had never told him the truth about his birth, spinning instead some story about his father being dead. But in sorting through his mother's papers, Shaw discovered the truth—several truths, in fact. His mother had been in love with Walter Scott, had become pregnant by him, but had been, as she herself put it in her journal, "discarded" in favour of the "better marriage" provided by Margaret Winton-Addams.

Shaw's mother accepted some money from Scott and fled to the United States, where she had a younger sister. Shaw grew up believing his father dead. The revelation not only that he was alive, but that he had prospered in society after having caused Shaw's mother misery and torment, led to a son's rage. But it was impotent rage, Shaw thought, until he came across the love letters. His mother must at some point have stolen them from Scott, or at least had come out of the relationship in possession of them. Shaw decided on a teasing revenge, knowing Scott would deduce that any black-

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mailer in possession of the letters was probably also well informed about his affair and the bastard son.

He used the tour party as an elaborate cover (and also, he admitted, because it was a cheap travel option). He brought with him to Britain not only the letters, but also the series of typed notes. The irony was that he had been to Edinburgh before, had studied there for three months as part of some exchange with his American college. He knew now why his mother, though proud of the scholarship, had been against his going. For three months he had lived in his father's city, yet hadn't known it.

He sent the notes from London—the travel party's base for much of its stay in England. The exchange—letters for cash—had gone ahead in the Cafe Royal, the bar having been a haunt of his student days. But he had known his final note, delivered by hand, would tempt Sir Walter, would lead him to the top of the Scott Monument. No, he said, he hadn't just wanted Sir Walter to see him, to see the son he had never known. Shaw had much of the money on him, stuffed into a money belt around his waist. The intention had been to release wads of money, Sir Walter's money, down onto Princes Street Gardens.

"I didn't mean for him to die. . . . I just wanted him to know how I felt about him. . . . I don't know. But Jesus,"—he grinned—"I still wish I'd let fly with all that loot."

Rebus shuddered to think of the ramifications. Stampede in Princes Street! Hundreds dead in lunchtime spree! Biggest *scoor-oot* ever! No, best not to think about it. Instead, he made for the Cafe Royal himself. It was late morning, the day after Berkely's arrest. The pub was quiet as yet, but Rebus was surprised to see Dr. Jameson standing at the bar, fortifying himself with what looked suspiciously like a double whisky. Remembering how he had left the doctor in the lurch regarding Sir Walter's body, Rebus grinned broadly and offered a healthy slap on the back.

"Morning, Doc, fancy seeing you in here." Rebus leaned his elbows on the bar. "We mustn't be keeping you busy enough." He paused. There was a twinkle in his eye as he spoke. "Here, let me get you a stiff one . . ." And he laughed so hard even the waiters from the Oyster Bar came to investigate. But all they saw was a tall, well-built man leaning against a much smaller, more timid man, and saying as he raised his glass: "Here's to mortality, to old mortality!"

So all in all it was just another day in the Cafe Royal. ●

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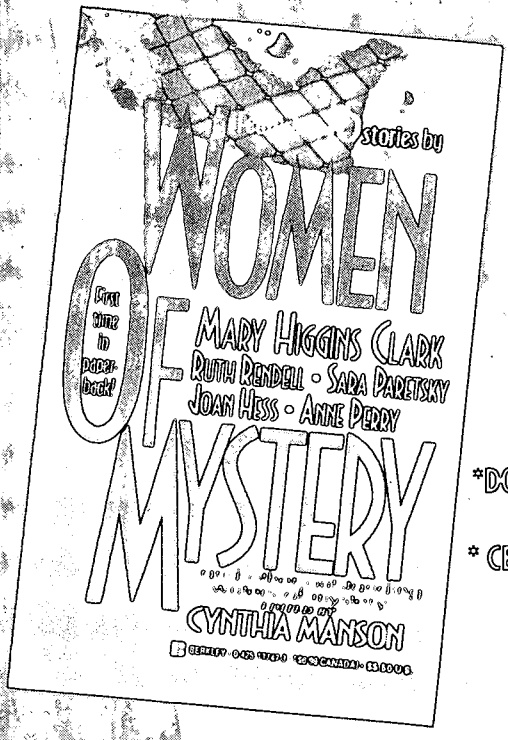
DESIGNS ON CRIME



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NEVER KNEW HE HAD IT IN HIM

by SIMON WINCHESTER

They had gone at least ten miles down the turnpike, heading east, before Gwen first said something about the package. Until then everyone had kept a dignified, rather strained silence about it. Once in a while they had turned to look at it, not quite believing what they had been told. And the package itself had been sitting there on the backseat of the Ford, looking innocent enough, bouncing slightly on the Naugahyde.

Each time they went over a bump, and it jounced against the urn, it clinked in a dull metallic way. Otherwise, when the car was riding smooth, it just lay on the folds of the seat, its eccentric lumpiness softened a bit by the brown paper wrapping, but outlined in other parts by the tightly tied string. If they looked carefully they could see an old address label, but because of the creases all that was legible were some odd letters and numbers. "al Parlo," said one line, then "3 Henre" and "sburg Pe." Of course, had they the inclination they could have worked it out: Tate's Funeral Parlor. 2133 Henredon Drive. Greensburg, Pennsylvania.

But frankly they were not so much bothered about the provenance of the wrapping paper. They knew that well enough, having driven from the selfsame parlor these fifteen minutes. What they were more concerned about—infinitely more concerned about—was what exactly was wrapped inside the paper. Which specific point Gwen addressed, more or less directly, with her first remark—one which

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students of the few recorded witticisms of the Morgan family would long remember as a classic.

"I just didn't know he had it in him," was what Gwen said. And then, as if remembering how lightly her words might be taken on any subsequent retelling of the story, added, rather breathlessly, "I mean—he never said anything. The doctor never told us. He never complained or nothing." And then, the funeral of Gramps having been a customarily sad occasion, she burst into tears, and for the next few miles sobbed silently into her handkerchief. A thin snow began to fall, blowing from the east. Jerry switched on the wipers, and after a few more minutes, the lights.

Henry Allen's death had been long and slow, though mercifully, he assured everyone, it was not very painful for him. He had been seventy-six, and had put up what Dr. Markham, in a gesture to Gwen, had said was a "good fight—as always." There were a few relatives down for the funeral—Henry's only son, Gwen's father, had died long ago, and there were few others of that generational layer. Henry himself had been a widower for these past thirty years. There were just the two granddaughters, Gwen and Amy, and their husbands. Gwen's mother had remarried and moved to New Zealand, and was rarely seen.

But that all being said, the service was far from being thinly attended. To underline Henry's renown as a fighter, what with his Purple Heart and his battle ribbons, the entire 423rd Chapter—Greensburg, Ligonier, and Latrobe—of the VFW had been on hand at the ceremony. A hundred and three gnarled old combatants, men who had fought with Henry in the Pacific and, most notably, in Korea forty years before, had stood to attention in the cold outside the little Three Falls crematorium and saluted their farewells to a fallen comrade.

Gwen had been delighted. They had never called her to tell her they planned to send Gramps off in such style. The men had just turned up, in a couple of Bluebird buses. She had been almost moved to tears more than once during the service, and afterwards, as she said her goodbyes. Many of the old soldiers, she noticed, had dabbed their eyes throughout the ceremony, though as Jerry was to remark later that night, it was probably more because of the bitter easterly wind than for any special grief. Soldiers, he said, are case-hardened about death and dying: anyone, he said, who makes it out of the theater and into the streets dies luckier than most. The old boys of

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the 423rd saw in Henry an example of their common good fortune, relatively speaking.

In any case, her interest in the soldiers had been cut short by what had happened in the crematorium office. It had been a strange few minutes, which started when old Mr. Tate had come over to her in the parking lot. He sidled up, trying to be respectful and serious, but he had a strangely excited glint in his eye, and clearly had something urgent to say.

"I'm so sorry to interrupt, Mrs. Morgan, but could you come to the office for just a few moments? There's something—well, something unexplained. Something I'd like you to see."

Gwen followed old Mr. Tate up the steps and into his dim little office. She thought it might be the bill, though in truth it seemed somewhat ungracious for Mr. Tate to be talking about money at this point. The firm had a good reputation, after all. The hospital had said they would handle things with the utmost sensitivity, and even though she lived down in Washington, so far away, Tate's could be trusted to handle everything with great discretion.

Then she saw a small gray vessel on the blotter on the partner's desk, and realized instantly that she was being dense. It was the ashes, of course—Mr. Tate was going to give her old Gramps's ashes. She grinned inwardly. She had never been to a crematorium before, but had always wondered idly how long an interval there was between the process and the product, as she preferred to think of it. There must be a period of cooling, surely. Anyway, here was the answer: old Grandpa Allen, laid out on a bed in Westmoreland County Hospital on a Wednesday morning, his ashes in a six-inch-high pewter jar on Friday lunchtime.

She reached down to touch the urn. The grayish metal, with its skinlike hammered texture, was as warm or as cool as you expected pewter to be. It was sort of neutral, like the color. No more than that.

"Everyone likes to touch the urn when it's holding their loved one," said Mr. Tate. "It's a very kindly gesture, I always think."

Gwen nodded. "These—it's for me, yes?"

"It most certainly is, Mrs. Morgan. But there is something else I have to give you. I am a bit puzzled, to be candid. I was wondering if something had gone wrong here."

He leaned towards her, so close she could read the name on his spectacles.

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"Tell me, Mrs. Morgan—your grandfather. I hope you don't mind my asking. But was there anything, well, *odd* about the way he—the way he *moved,* let us say? I'm sorry to ask. But something's come up. Something—and we didn't know if it is our problem or his."

Gwen must have looked puzzled, for Mr. Tate stood up in a decisive sort of way and strode over to a table on the far side of the room. For a moment he had his back to her, and she could see he was picking something up. Something large and gray and lumpen that he carried back to her inside his spread fingers. He brought it back to the table and then, with an exhalation of relief, released it next to the urn of Sergeant Henry Allen's ashes.

It was a large piece of gray metal, twisted and deformed by heat. It was about as big as a fist—Tate had had to spread his bony fingers right around it. It must have weighed five pounds. She looked up at him.

"Pick it up," he said.

She did so, not without difficulty. It was warm—a good deal warmer than the urn. In fact, as she held it longer it seemed to get hotter, and she dropped it on the desk and it rolled to one side. She fingered it gingerly and turned it this way and that. It was an excessively ugly thing, in parts sharp and irregular and glassy like obsidian, in other places smeared with a rust color that seemed to have been sintered into the mass. There were little gobbets of once-molten metal standing out from the main body of the piece like warts. Mostly it was irregular, though along one side there were three straight furrows with folds of metal alongside. For the moment she discounted their appearance and recalled pictures she had once seen at an exhibition in Arizona.

"Meteorite?" she asked wanly. But she knew what Mr. Tate was going to say.

"No, Mrs. Morgan. Your grandfather. There's no other explanation. I've spoken to Mr. Mawby—he's the engineer around here. Had him for thirty years. Knows the oven better than any man around. He's seen everything—gold teeth, titanium plates—we always give them back, of course. Scissors, bits of molten glass. We had a man here had a Parker pen, the tortoiseshell all eaten up. But it could write as well as the day it was made.

"But this—this thing." He gestured with distaste at the malevolent chunk of ironmongery. "Mawby and I can't think of any other explanation for it. Oven's clean as a whistle. We always check. So there's only one solution. Only one. It had to come out of the body.

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This darn thing was inside Mr. Allen, and he must have known.

"You'll forgive me for saying so, I've never seen anything like it. Five pounds of iron inside a man, and he carries it around all his life. That's why I asked you—did he move funny or something? He must have been all off balance. It must have been something terrible. How'n hell did he ever get into an airplane? He'd be setting off alarms from here all the way to Katmandu."

They talked about it all the way home. The weather was closing in as they passed over Chestnut Ridge, and near the mouth of the Allegheny Tunnel the state police had lit flares because a truck had gone off the turnpike and was hanging dangerously over a streambed. The snow was heavy here and the road slick with wet ice. The traffic crawled along with muffled-up policemen flagging the motorists, warning them of the dangers. It was, in other words, a typically diverting December night on the Pennsylvania Turnpike when most drivers would be white-knuckled with concentration and fear. But in the Morgans' Ford the urn and the neatly wrapped chunk of iron knocked heavily against each other in the back, and in the front seat Jerry and Gwen tried to make some sense out of one of life's more bizarre discoveries.

They both knew a little of the old man's war stories. They knew he had been in the infantry, had seen some service on Okinawa and in Japan; and they knew, most intimately of all, that he had been at the Battle for Old Baldy, that infamous hill in Korea. That was where he had won his Purple Heart. He had been hit in the left arm, he had told them over not a few Thanksgiving dinners; once in a while he'd roll up his shirt and show them the scar, faded now. It was part of Gwen's childhood—seeing Gramps's bad arm.

The injury had never caused him much of a problem, by all accounts. When he came out of Korea he had gone to school, courtesy of the G.I. Bill, but he was never graduated. He was thirty-five, set in his ways, had no aptitude for study, he said. Instead, after a year of doing odd jobs, he had joined the United States Postal Service. His wife—they had married during the Second War, and Gwen's father was born in 1944—had left him around this time. He was not especially grief-stricken, by all accounts. First, for a decade or so, he had done the obligatory rounds duty in Pittsburgh and Wheeling and some smaller iron cities like Uniontown and McKeesport and Monroeville—and no one that Gwen could recall ever complained of him limping, or walking funny, or anything like that.

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Then he was made up to inspector during that momentous time in 1963 when the postal service introduced the Zone Improvement Plan Code, the Zip code, and he worked to see its implementation in Punxsutawney 15767 and Indiana, PA 15701 (where there were, not unnaturally, some few problems, just as there were in California, PA, and in other confusingly named communities). He was very proud of that: forty-six years old and a part of history, however so small. Finally he was promoted to Senior Inspector of Mails in the office in Greensburg 15601 and had retired in good enough health, so Gwen remembered, two years later. They had given him the senior's job just so as to help with the pension, for which he was eternally thankful.

And so his life entered its long and slow decline. He went off to California once, to see Amy and the children, and in 1988 he came down to Washington to see Gwen married to Jerry. But—and now they were trying to remember, as they sat in a truckstop at the Breezewood Interchange—he had never seemed, well, weighed down by anything like this. "Five pounds of solid metal?" Jerry kept saying, gazing out incredulously at the snow, now turning to rain. "How did he ever keep it such a secret?"

When they got home Gwen put the pewter urn on the mantel. They would know in a week or so, once the will was read, where the ashes should be scattered. Gramps had never said anything. Perhaps, Jerry said later, there would be something in the will about the shrapnel. If that was what it was.

They unwrapped the brown paper and put the thing on the dining room table, where there was a strong light. God, it was an ugly thing to have had to carry around. It had a coarse, brutish look about it. The heat of the furnace had distorted it, of course—the three furrows on one side must be the imprint of the bars, the moly-steel fireproof bars inside the oven itself. This chunk of metal had melted itself around them until they turned off the gas jets and raked it out. So it wouldn't have looked quite as bad as this all those years it was inside the old boy. But even so, it was ugly. You only had to think of muscle moving around that. Jerry winced.

"Hell, I remember playing basketball with him, out in California. You remember—out in front of the garage, with Phil. Amy was pregnant at the time, and you and she were in the kitchen yakking about something or other, and we all went out to the front of the house. Gramps started shooting baskets. He couldn't have done that

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with this thing inside him, surely. Not unless he was one hell of a lot tougher than I thought he was."

He squinted more closely. On one end—if the thing could be said to have ends—was what looked like a screw thread. There were some regular grooves, half a dozen or so, all parallel. They formed an approximate annulus around what, for the sake of this inspection, he would call the upper end. The lower end was narrower, almost pointed, but it was here that the metal had melted into dozens of small blisters and it was barely possible to see an outline of what the thing might have been.

But over that evening, and then again over the weekend, Jerry began to work out what the object was. He weighed it on Gwen's Braun kitchen scale—five pounds, two ounces. He measured it carefully—from end to end, five inches, from side to side, four. He found an old physics textbook and measured the volume by seeing how much water it displaced, measuring it in cups, using one of the kitchen milk jugs. He found out the density and worked out that what he had was probably an alloy of steel and nickel.

After that, and with the memory of all those good old boys of the 423rd VFW standing to attention back up in the cold of western Pennsylvania, the conclusion was simple enough for Jerry Morgan, amateur engineer and military history buff, to draw. Sergeant First Class Henry Drewman Allen, Ninth Infantry Regiment, Second United States Infantry Division, a wounded hero of the Battle of Old Baldy, had been taken from the field bleeding from a wound in the left arm on the evening of Thursday, November 13, 1952. A small piece of shrapnel had been removed by surgeons at the field hospital, and Sergeant Allen had been flown to a hospital ship in the sea of Japan and then, eventually, back home to Pennsylvania.

What the doctors never knew, and what the stoical Sergeant Allen never bothered to inform them, was that the nose casing of a Chinese 82mm M-41 mortar, fired during the battle, had somehow not only fragmented and smashed his arm, but had also embedded most of itself in his shoulder. He was to live the rest of his life in pain, with the burden of a fist-sized chunk of iron and nickel inside him, with a memory far more potent than that of the simple scar with which he'd frighten his granddaughters and shock the Thanksgiving guests. He was even more of a hero than they had thought.

One or two nights later, Gwen telephoned Amy, who was now back in San Mateo. They talked for twenty minutes, and afterwards Gwen reported to Jerry.

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"They agree. They think we should tell the VFW chapter. And the papers. It has the makings of a really great story. And she said what I said. We never knew he had it in him. A good line, don't you think?"

Captain Kruzscinsky of the Ligonier and District Branch of the Veterans of Foreign Wars was as excited as one would imagine. Of course, he said, a special citation would be prepared, honoring Henry's memory, his courage. "It was his grace under pressure," the captain said. "Just the sort of thing we like."

The piece of metal would go into the VFW museum on Main Street. They would bring it out on Memorial Day and on the Fourth of July to show what Pennsylvania fighting men were made of. It would be like the wooden hand, the prize trophy of the French Legionnaires, which they still kept in a glass box in Marseilles and paraded once a year, held by a soldier wearing white gloves.

"We'll take good care of it, Mrs. Morgan, have no fear. We'll only handle it with white gloves. You have my word on that, as a soldier."

And good to his word, Captain Kruzscinsky was in touch with the *Tribune-Review* in Greensburg the next day and a freelance photographer turned up at the Morgan's front door in Chevy Chase the following week. So far as they heard, it was the front-page main story the following Saturday. "Postal Worker Died a First-Class Hero," read the headline. "Carried a secret package all the way home from Korea." The story was written by a woman whose father hadn't been born when the Battle for Old Baldy had been fought.

The story made the Pittsburgh TV stations next day, by which time the captain already had the "Korean meteorite" as people had dubbed it and was preparing a new home for it. An honor guard was filmed taking the UPS Next Day package up to the Main Street VFW museum, and there was footage of the ceremonial unwrapping and the placing of the object in a glass case which had previously held a Junior League bridge trophy.

The coverage was respectful, if faintly amused. It didn't make the lead, but it was well enough placed. It featured blurred black and white photographs of the young Sergeant Allen at Inchon, a picture of the Purple Heart he had won, the reminiscences of a buddy named Mack Karnovitch who Gwen had thought was long dead but who was in fact in a retirement community in a town called Mars, and who had fought with a Pennsylvania-raised infantry unit on either Old Baldy or Pork Chop or one of the great Korean mountains. "Old Henry was a great battler. A great battler," he declared shakily.

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And then came the pictures from Ligonier, with the ceremonial guard, the case, and the piece of metal.

"So old Henry Allen was a bigger hero than we ever knew," said a young man in a blazer, a man with a voice far too deep for him. "He was a bigger man than we ever knew. Everyone knew he was a good man. But seeing this—they all said simply: We Never Knew He Had It In Him . . .

"For WGBG News Hour this is James Sneed reporting, in Ligonier."

Over in a studio apartment in Pittsburgh, Dan Harris saw the story that same night. He blinked, then pinched himself. This, for ten miserable days, was what he feared might happen. It was his personal nightmare come true. The piece of metal in that poor innocent man—it was all his fault. Poor Mr. Allen—yes, that was his name, he remembered the tag on the toe—had nothing to do with it at all. The explanation was no less bizarre, but it was a great deal simpler than that which Mr. Sneed had just told half of the folks in the Monongahela Valley.

Dan Harris was a freshman at Penn, a biology major, and he came from Akron. His girlfriend, Carol, was a Canadian medical student, currently doing an internship in London. The two had met at a science fair in Saskatchewan three years before and were desperately in love. He had vowed to see her in London at Christmas, but to buy a ticket he needed a good, well-paying job. Then there had been the ad in the *Gazette:* "Hospital worker wanted, Westmoreland County Hospital, Greensburg. Applicants with strong constitution and rudimentary anatomical skills preferred. Piecework rates. Write John Utton, Box 545."

Harris had been the only serious applicant. Utton said he had managed to screen out all the necrophiliacs over the phone. He had liked Harris's remark that "humans are just like big dogfish, really—or rabbits, I guess," and reckoned he would have no problem with the work required in the autopsy lab around the back of the county morgue. The pay, he told Harris, was twenty bucks a body. Prep them for the autopsy, clean them up afterwards, stitch them up, and hand them over to the funeral home. Strong stomach needed, but other than that, good money.

"Only don't make a career out of it," said Utton, looking more than usually lugubrious. "Else you'll end up looking like me." And

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he gave the kind of laugh you'd expect from a Charles Addams cartoon.

The first days on the job, in early November, had been easy enough. Yes, Harris had gagged on his first corpse, but Utton had been there, and had showed him that by smoking a small cigar he could ward off the effects of the formalin and the other less savory aromas of the morgue. And the chief mortician, a big German woman with the name Fleischaker, who everyone not surprisingly called Flesh Hacker, was a jolly woman without the slightest tendency to the macabre. She was actually interested in the biology of death, and moreover had a cousin at the University of Montana who was writing a Ph.D. thesis on a little-known branch of the rhythmic sciences coming to be known as Thanatomusicology. "Muzak to Die By," Utton called it until he saw the cousin concerned and was astonished by her beauty and her brains and began to take all of her utterances with total seriousness.

It was sometime during his second week at work, the first week of November, that Sergeant Henry Allen presented himself, at horizontal attention, for Dan Harris's services. The toe poking from beneath the shroud had a small label on it, written by the consulting physician. "Marrow test required," it said. "Suspected leukemic disorder." At the head of the trolley was the patient's name, sex, age, and date of death: H. D. Allen, it said. Male, 76. 11/4/92. To be fair, Harris didn't remember all of this, but he did remember the surname, and the request from the doctor. The standard operating procedure required that he remove a femur and send it up to the pathology laboratory. They would perform the necessary tests later that day and determine—Harris guessed the insurance had an interest; or perhaps it was just a Pennsylvania statistical requirement—if Mr. Allen had died of leukemia or from something else, like weariness, or old age.

It was simple enough work, preparing a body for Dr. Fleischaker's explorations. A long incision on the ventral side, removal of the digestive tract, opening of the brain pan—well, for the squeamish, perhaps not too graphic at this point. Not, in any case, that work on the torso or the cranium is particularly relevant to this story. Nor is it relevant to mention the fact that Harris routinely removed the patients' pituitary glands to send them off—at a bounty of $100 for a tub of ten—to a friend of his at Case Western Reserve who was doing some dark work on male growth hormone, which the innocent-looking little pituitary manufactured.

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The relevant moment on this particular day came when Dan Harris took out the femur. He broke it away from the pelvis and the tibia and fibula and pulled it away, tearing the great wads of connective tissues that make the thigh so bulky a part of the body. Mr. Allen's muscles were somewhat wasted, as you'd expect of a man of seventy-six, but it was still something of a tussle to get his thighbone out, after which he scrubbed it clean and put it in a Ziploc bag for the folks upstairs.

Dr. Fleischaker came and did her thing, smoking and grunting as she inspected all the viscera. Then, with a Wagnerian flourish, she tore off her green rubber apron and said: "Lunchtime. Sew the old man up, will you? Tate's are taking him off. They need him by two."

Henredon Drive was only ten minutes away, and the man from Tate's Funeral Parlor dropped in all the time, picking up customers, as he called them, in his black Lincoln hearse. He was called Millinship, and he was tiresome, Dan thought—always wanting the specks of dried blood wiped off the faces, always wanting the eyes to match even if the lids were closed.

"I know you guys take them," he said. "And I really don't care what little side orders you get from all those smart-ass university pals of yours. But you put glass ones in their place and you make darned sure they're the right color, okay? Otherwise I spill the beans. You got it?"

It was in anticipation of Millinship's hostility that Harris knew he had to put something in Allen's leg. In all other respects the body was now fine: a decent blanket stitch had closed all the wounds. The eyes had been left untouched. The hair was combed neatly over the back of the head. The hands had been scrubbed. But the leg—now that the femur was gone, it had nothing supportive in it between hip and knee. It was a bit of an embarrassment. It kept dropping off the side of the table as Dan worked tidying up the rest of Mr. Allen's appearance.

Millinship would never accept it, that was for sure. He would be truculent about it, and if he was in a foul temper again he would probably threaten to tell everyone about the eye scam, and the pituitary scam, and one or two other little favors that Harris had been asked to perform for his friends back at school. So he had to finish Mr. Allen off and leave him in good condition, acceptable to Tate's. He had to stiffen up that leg. But what, pray, to use?

It was cold outside, the beginning of an easterly wind whipping the garbage around in the yard. There would be snow by tomorrow,

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Harris told himself. But then as he mouthed to himself, "It's an ill wind . . . ," so, suddenly, a gust blew away a sheet of cardboard to reveal a short length of drainpipe, lying unwanted on the ground. The pipe, galvanized steel by the look of it, was eleven inches long, two inches in diameter, and had a small angled screw-end to it. It must have weighed five or six pounds, heavier than he would have liked. But in all other ways it looked perfect.

He brought it back out of the cold and placed it against the great wound on Allen's thigh. It was a bit too long. He found a bone saw and hacked away for ten minutes or so, not very efficiently, but eventually reducing the pipe by an inch. He jammed the milled end into the concavity of the hip joint and then, straining against the old muscles of the infantryman's leg, pushed the other end against the knee joint.

At first it refused to go in. He pressed and pushed, twisting this way and that until suddenly, with a loud click, the pipe went home. The lower leg shot out like an arrow, the foot straightening up so hard that the hospital slipper that had been half tied to it shot off and landed near the sink. Harris gave a cheer. Perfect, he said to himself, and hurriedly blanket-stitched the wound closed, each turn of the thread removing the dull grey gleam of steel from human sight. There must've been five pounds of iron in the old guy's leg. Just as well he wasn't planning to go swimming. But no one would ever know.

He had just finished and was tying off when Millinship arrived.

"Who's this then? Name of Allen?" He looked at his list. "Got him. Eleven tomorrow. Important one. War hero, you know." He wheeled the corpse out through the glassine doors. "Done a good job on this guy, Harris," he called. "Bit of a waste, though. We're cremating him. All your handiwork up in smoke. Nothing'll be left."

Of course, Harris realized in an instant. He was going to call out, but never did. He said nothing, then or later. In fact, he only ever told one other person, and that was on the day of the newscast. He called Utton at home.

Had he seen the news? Yes, Utton said, and he had particularly liked the story about the great unsung hero from Greensburg, the soldier with that mortar shell in him, carried it for forty years and didn't tell a soul. Great story. *What a guy.*

And then Harris confessed, swearing Utton to silence for eternity. Utton laughed like a drain at first, threatening to call the station, to tell them what really happened. But then, after Harris asked

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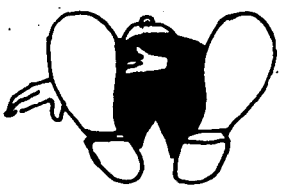
him who he supposed might benefit from such truth, Utton agreed. "Guess you're right," he said, chuckling. Then he cleared his throat and sounded authoritative. If such a thing should ever happen again—if a body came in with a tag on a toe, a request for a thighbone, and a pushy creep like Millinship calling for the body—then, Utton said, there were a bunch of chair legs in the hut outside, ready and waiting for such a purpose.

"They're the perfect size for a thigh," said Utton. "We always use them. Biodegradable and all that. And there's no danger of one of them ever turning someone into a hero. You should use one next time. Far less complicated. You know what we always say? They'll never know he has it in him."



DETECTIVERSE

TAXES

by MARIAN ROTHE

The loss he took he did compound;
He thought he was on solid ground.
He padded his costs and padded his liens
And lowered his profits and lowered his means;
Tripled dependents more than by three,
Not honest, not truthful at all was he.
He thought he'd fooled old Uncle Sam
Till he discovered he was in a jam.
So now as he dwells in jail cell small
He wishes that he'd declared it all.

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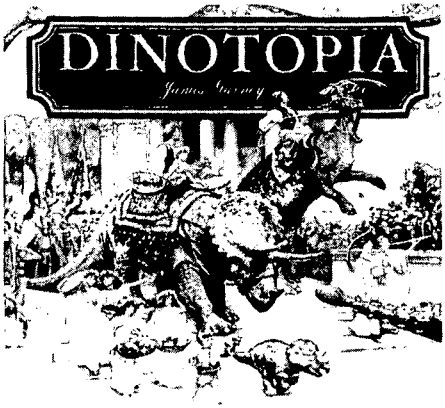
WORLDS OF WONDER THAT CHARM, ENTERTAIN & INSPIRE



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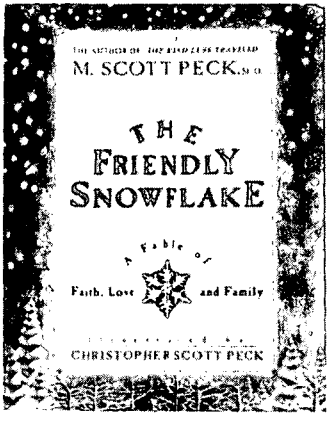

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a *NEW* Garth story by

GEORGE C. CHESBRO

In his fourth case for EQMM, *cool-headed private detective Garth Frederickson is asked to turn ghostbuster by an elderly acquaintance who complains that her house's friendly ghosts have turned hostile . . .*

HAUNTS

by GEORGE C. CHESBRO

"They're here!" Madame Bellarossa shrieked as the flames of the seven candles on the table guttered and then Mary screamed, her voice joining the other woman's in a duet of horror, her features twisted with the same terror Garth had seen on Elsie Manning's face when he had found her huddled on the ground at his back door at three o'clock in the morning one week before, too weak to pound any more, scratching at the screen like a stricken cat.

"They want me to die, Garth!" the eighty-year-old woman had said in a strangled whisper as she clutched at the hem of Garth's robe.

Garth Frederickson looked around, saw nothing in the warm September night beyond the glow cast by his porch light, heard nothing but the sibilant whisper of waves washing up on the beach fifty yards away. He bent down, placed his hands under the woman's frail arms, gently lifted her to her feet, and held her as she trembled violently and grabbed the lapels of his pajama top. Despite the fact that he knew the answer, he asked, "Who wants you to die?"

"My ghosts."

"They can't hurt you here, Elsie," Garth said in a soothing tone, leading her into the house, the kitchen, where he eased her down

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into a chair at the rectangular butcher-block table. He took off his woolen robe and wrapped it around her, then went to the range to heat water for tea. He looked up when his wife appeared in the doorway. Brilliant blue eyes still blurred by sleep, white-streaked, waist-length blond hair disheveled. Mary Tree was still the most beautiful woman he had ever known, and the love he felt surging in him like a tide at the sight of her came as a welcome relief from the pall cast by the trembling old woman Garth considered to be ill with a kind of spiritual leprosy she had consciously nurtured, indeed reveled in and boasted about, for so many years, and which had now resulted not only in what Garth believed to be the most bizarre and perverse legal decision in the history of the country, but had also cost her the sale of her home and the money he knew she desperately needed, and might also be killing her. "Elsie's had a fright, Mary. She needs some time to rest."

The folk singer sighed sympathetically, then quickly walked into the kitchen and sat down next to the other woman, resting her large hands with their long fingers on Elsie Manning's still-quaking shoulders. "Oh, Elsie, Elsie, it's all right now. Everything's all right. Your ghosts?"

Elsie Manning seemed unable to speak. Her pale, watery green eyes were still wide with shock and horror as she stared somewhere over Mary's head, transfixed by her own private haunt that only she could see. Without her dentures in place her cheeks were sunken, and her mouth formed an O as she slowly nodded her head.

The kettle began to whistle. Garth prepared three cups of tea, brought them to the table, placed one in front of Elsie. "Sip some of that, Elsie," he said, smiling reassuringly. "It will make you feel better. Just be careful; it's hot."

Mary placed her hands around the old woman's, helping to steady them as Elsie lifted the cup to her mouth and sipped some of the steaming brew. When she set the cup back down, her hands and body did not seem to be trembling as much, and her pale green eyes had come back into focus. "I just don't understand it," she said weakly. "I've lived in that house all my life, and the ghosts were always so friendly. They were young lovers who committed suicide in an upstairs room rather than let their parents force them apart. They loved my parents, and they loved me. Sometimes, when I was a child, I'd see them sitting at the foot of my bed, all aglow, smiling at me. Sometimes they'd sing lullabies to put me to sleep. I always felt so comfortable with them. They kept me company. Now . . . they

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hate me because I want to sell the house and leave them. I feel their hatred, know that they want me to die. They send cockroaches."

"You called the exterminator about the cockroaches," Garth said. "Didn't he take care of them?"

Elsie nodded tentatively. "Yes. But they came back. I was too ashamed to tell you. The exterminator came again, but the cockroaches were back a week later. Now they're all over the house. And rats, and terrible smells. Garth, you and Mary have been in my home; you know I keep a clean house. And then the phone will start ringing at all sorts of odd hours. I'll answer, but there'll be nobody there. I hang up, and the phone starts ringing again. Sometimes that will go on for hours, all night. I just can't fathom how spirits who had been so loving could have turned so spiteful."

Garth and Mary exchanged glances, and Garth reached across the table to touch the old woman's liver-spotted hand. "Elsie, you've been under tremendous stress since what happened with the buyer you had. I don't think you've ever really understood that most people aren't as comfortable with ghosts—friendly or otherwise—as you are. Humans are a very superstitious breed, and Americans are just as superstitious as the rest of the world. For years, you've been enjoying your haunted house, talking about it to anybody who would listen. You loved the attention when the local paper would run a story on your haunted house every year. But now you want to move into a retirement community where all your needs will be taken care of—staff to prepare your meals and clean your apartment, and doctors to look after you—and you need a lot of money to get into the place where you want to go. You've already lost one buyer who offered a fair price and gave you a sizable binder because a week before the closing he got wind of the fact that the house was supposedly haunted. We may agree with your attorney that the binder should have been yours because he reneged, but incredibly, the judge ruled that you should have told him the house was haunted. In effect, the state of New York has offered a legal opinion that yes, there really are such things as haunted houses, and one of them happens to be in Cairn. And now you have a worse problem because the wire services have picked up on it, and it's become a national news story. You'll probably continue to be deluged with phony seers, sages, astrologers, psychics, and professional magicians who've discovered they can pick up a lot of free publicity simply by issuing a press release saying they're thinking of buying your haunted house. But they don't want your house, and most couldn't begin to afford

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the three quarters of a million it's worth. They just want the attention. And nobody else wants your house, at least not at the moment. What you have to do, Elsie, is give the story time to die down. Eventually you'll find another buyer, because it's a fine old house sitting right on the Hudson River, and there aren't too many of those. But—above all else—you have to stop advertising the fact that you think it's haunted."

"I don't think I have much time," the woman said in a hollow voice. Her eyes had once again gone out of focus, and she put a shaking hand to her throat. "Tonight one of them touched me—here. It woke me up. They were both there, in hooded robes, standing next to my bed in the moonlight. I could see them just as clearly as I see the two of you right now. But this was different from the other times when they've come to me. They've never worn hooded robes before, never hidden their faces. And they've never touched me before. The hand on my throat was so *cold,* like it had been in ice water. I didn't think he was going to let me up, but he did, and that's when I ran over here. I—" She abruptly stopped speaking, looked hard at Mary, then at Garth. "I know you don't believe me. You think it's all my imagination. You've always been too polite to say so, but I know you think I'm just a batty old woman."

"Elsie," Garth replied in an even tone, "I don't find what you believe any more improbable than the things believed in by ninety-nine percent of the population of Cairn, or the country, and I don't consider most of my other friends and neighbors batty."

"But you don't believe there are ghosts in my house, do you?"

"That shouldn't surprise you."

"But one *touched* me tonight, Garth!"

Garth sighed. "Elsie, Mary, my brother, and I have faithfully attended every one of your Halloween séances ever since Mary and I settled in Cairn—in fact, we've felt honored to be invited. We find them great fun. My brother would be the first to tell you that he'd love nothing better than to meet a ghost, sit down with it, and have a nice long chat about whatever."

"But your little brother doesn't believe in ghosts."

"No, he doesn't believe in ghosts either. But he's open to the possibility of anything because he believes in mystery, and he'd be highly amused to find out that he's wrong, and that there really are such things as ghosts. But the fact of the matter is that there have never been any visitations at the six séances we've been to, not a peep from anyone or anything that wasn't present and accounted for."

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"It's because you and Mary and your little brother don't believe in them. They won't appear if you don't believe in them."

Garth caressed his wife's cheek with the back of his hand, then rose from the table. "Elsie, I'm going to get dressed and go check on your house to make sure there's nobody there."

The old woman stiffened in her chair, clutched at Mary's arm. "No, Garth, don't go! There's no use! You won't find anything. They won't appear to you. It's me they're after."

Suddenly Elsie Manning began to cry—not in racking sobs, but softly, more now in hopeless despair than the terror she had displayed earlier. She closed her eyes, threw her head back, and opened her shrunken O of a mouth in a silent howl of torment as a steady stream of tears welled from between her eyelids and coursed down her cheeks. Garth had gone around the table, wrapped his powerful arms around the woman, and held her as close as, a week later, he now held Mary, who had collapsed from her chair to the floor. Mary's limbs twitched spasmodically, and her eyes rolled in her head. Garth kissed her cheeks, gently rocking his wife back and forth in the silence that was broken only by Madame Bellarossa's heavy breathing and Elsie's quavering voice offering a prayer. Finally Mary grew still, opened her eyes. "They're here, Garth. My God, they really are here in this room with us."

"Are you all right?"

"I'm so cold . . . "

"Don't try to talk. Just rest here. I'll get you a blanket."

"No, Garth. There's no time. They won't wait."

"Let her speak," Madame Bellarossa said in a low voice that had grown slightly hoarse. "It's important. Mary's been chosen as the messenger."

Garth nodded to the portly black woman with the crimson lipstick and huge hoop earrings who was leading the séance, then looked back at his wife. "What happened?"

"They . . . came to me, Garth. I felt them."

"Felt them how?"

Mary swallowed hard, licked her lips. "At first there was just this terrible cold. I'm all right now, but for just a moment there I felt colder than I ever have in my life. And then they came into my thoughts, started to tell me why they're so angry. It has something to do with selfishness, and terrible greed."

"They think Elsie's being greedy just because she wants to sell her home? All she was asking for was what had been appraised as its fair market value."

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Mary shook her head. "It's not that."

"Then what greed, Mary? Whose greed?"

"I . . . don't know. I think they were about to tell me all of it, but then I passed out."

"They're still here in the room," Madame Bellarossa said in a distant monotone, slurring her words slightly. "They want us to know, but the circle has to be restored."

Garth looked up at the black woman; her eyes were half closed and her arms stretched out over the table as if she were in a trance. The black man standing stiffly beside her, Jeffrey Bond, was staring at Mary, his mouth half open and his eyes filled with amazement. Both John and Linda Luft, the young, blond, black-eyed married couple who looked so much alike they might have been brother and sister, had stepped back from the table and were standing at the very edge of the flickering pool of candlelight. Linda Luft's eyes were glazed with shock, and she was very pale. Her husband, too, looked pale in the dim light, but the lines of his mouth were drawn down in a frown of scepticism. Elsie was standing at the opposite end of the table from Madame Bellarossa; the old woman's eyes were closed, and her thin lips continued to move in silent prayer. The only person at the table who had remained seated was Harry Parker, Garth's friend, a professional magician and world-renowned debunker of psychic charlatans and supernatural occurrences. Parker seemed perfectly calm. He was leaning back in his chair, thick arms folded across his barrel chest. His face was impassive as he stared back at Garth, who asked, "Anybody else see, feel, or hear anything?"

Jeffrey Bond coughed, cleared his throat. "I felt the cold," he said, looking around somewhat sheepishly at the others. "I got a blast of it right on the back of my neck. It was just like Mary said; for just a moment, it was the coldest I've ever been in my life. And we all saw what happened to the candles." He paused and again looked around the table at the others. "Didn't we?"

"You're the expert, Harry," Garth said to his friend. "What happened to Mary and Jeff? What's going on here? Mass hysteria?"

The big man with the blue eyes and close-cropped black hair slowly blinked and seemed about to reply when he suddenly started. "I'll be damned," he said in a quiet but thoroughly astonished tone as he slowly unfolded his arms and looked down at his chest where blood was slowly seeping across the front of his white shirt, staining the cotton fabric as red as the dawn that had announced its presence

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and begun to push away the night the previous week when Garth, Mary, and Elsie Manning had sat around the butcher-block table in Garth's home.

"I guess I should go home now," Elsie had said in a small voice. She was still very pale, but she had stopped trembling. Mary had brushed the woman's hair, and this had seemed to calm her. "I've bothered you people long enough, woke you up and kept you up all night."

"Elsie," Mary said, gently squeezing the other woman's hand, "you're a dear friend, not a bother. And you're welcome to stay here as long as you want."

Elsie slowly shook her head. "It's still my home, at least until I'm able to sell it. I belong there. They don't come during the day anymore, not since they turned mean."

"I'll walk you home," Garth said, rising from his chair.

Garth took a flashlight, but it wasn't needed. As they walked along the beach, the shortest and easiest route to Elsie's home an eighth of a mile away, the sun appeared in the east over the Westchester hills across the river, causing the waters of the Hudson to glow first reddish orange, then golden. By the time they reached the three-story Victorian mansion that was Elsie's home, it was day. Garth opened the door, walked with Elsie through the large, lushly carpeted living room decorated with antique tapestries into the dining room, which was dominated by a heavy oak table in the center.

"Thank you, Garth," Elsie said with a sigh, easing herself down into a chair. She removed his robe from around her shoulders, handed it back to him. "Thank you for everything."

"Are you going to be all right?"

"Garth, I don't know what to do."

"You know I'm not the one who can help you with your ghost problem, Elsie."

"I don't know who else to turn to."

"Maybe a priest or minister."

"They don't believe me either," she replied, bitterness creeping into her voice. "They only believe in their own ghosts." She paused, shook her head, and once again tears misted her pale eyes. "Even though I know you don't believe there are ghosts here, you're the only person I can feel comfortable with anymore talking about it. I'm so afraid, Garth. What should I do?"

Garth pulled another chair out from the table, sat down, and leaned close to the old woman, looking intently into her eyes. "Stop believing."

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". . . What?"

"The ghosts in this house live off you, because of you. Stop feeding them with your belief and they'll go away."

"But Garth, one *did* touch me! He put his hand around my *throat!*"

"He touched you because you believe he touched you, because you believe there are ghosts and that they *can* touch you." Garth suppressed a sigh, brought his chair even closer, and took both the woman's hands in his. "Elsie, we all have our haunts. Haunts are just bad memories. It's when we don't recognize them for what they are that we start to give them the power to hurt us in the present."

Shadows moved in the woman's pale eyes as she stared back at Garth. Finally she asked, "You have haunts too?"

"Of course. But I don't ask them for stock tips, I don't let them sit on my bed, and I don't let them wrap their fingers around my throat."

"Would you tell me one of your haunts?"

"I grew up on a farm in Nebraska. I was maybe nine or ten when one day my favorite uncle, Uncle Bill, for no reason that anybody could fathom, up and left our Methodist church and joined a fundamentalist sect that was into handling rattlesnakes as a way of demonstrating their faith. About two weeks after he joined, Uncle Bill was bit in the throat by a rattler, and he died. The people in the sect he'd joined said he'd died because he lacked sufficient faith."

"Do you believe he died because he lacked sufficient faith?"

"Of course not. He died because he lacked sufficient brains. You have to be very careful what you believe, Elsie, because you become what you believe. Think of it as a question of mental hygiene. My Uncle Bill became a victim of his own belief system, exactly the same as you've become a victim of yours. Belief in gods or ghosts is like a brain fever; some have it, some don't, and some only pretend to have it because it seems to them that everyone else around them has it, and they don't want to be different. Just as with what happened to you, the fever is passed from generation to generation, and so all over the world we have tens of millions of people believing in ghosts they call God, Satan, Mohammed, Buddha, Jesus, devils, or angels. But some infections are more virulent and dangerous than others, and they'll bite you just as surely as that rattlesnake bit my uncle. For whatever reason, your belief system has turned on you. So stop believing before it does you more harm. Or change it. If you insist on believing in the supernatural, why don't you try something

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a little less toxic, like Unitarianism, or Reform Judaism, or maybe Zen Buddhism?"

Garth waited for some response from the woman, but there was none. Elsie's mouth opened and closed repeatedly, as if she wanted to say something but could not find the words. It did not surprise Garth, who gave the woman's hands a gentle squeeze, then leaned back in his chair and sighed. He knew from the confusion swimming in the woman's eyes that she had no real comprehension of what he was talking about, and the stunned expression on her face was not unlike that on Harry Parker's as he sat at this same table a week later during the interrupted séance and stared down at the blood-stain spreading across the front of his shirt. There were shocked gasps from the others around the table, and Linda Luft screamed. Garth eased Mary down on the carpet, then rose to his feet and strode quickly around the table toward his friend. He stopped when Harry Parker held up his hand. "It's all right, Garth," the burly man said in a tone that was at once distant and disbelieving, yet firm. "I'm okay."

"For Christ's sake, Harry, you're bleeding."

"Not anymore," the magician and investigator of the paranormal replied in the same distant voice. He unbuttoned his shirt to show his bare chest. The thick, wiry hair there was matted with blood, but there was no longer any seepage. "I'm not even cut. The blood must have come right through my pores. Wow."

"It's a sign," Madame Bellarossa intoned. Her head was tilted back now, her arms still extended out over the table. "They want to be taken seriously."

John Luft cleared his throat loudly. When the others turned to the young man with the blond hair, dark eyes, and thin face, he took his arm from around his ashen-faced, trembling wife and tapped his watch. "Uh, I really think Linda and I should be toddling off. It's getting pretty late."

Suddenly Madame Bellarossa's head came forward and her eyes opened wide. "That could be dangerous!" she snapped. "They haven't finished telling us what they want us to know!"

For the first time since the séance had begun, Elsie spoke in words not offered as a prayer. She seemed composed now, determined. She looked directly at John and Linda Luft and spoke in a soft but firm tone. "I understand now that this thing will have to be done if there's ever to be peace in this house. They've spoken to Mary this time, not to me, but I sense that they won't harm us—as long as they can

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finish their story. But they want the two of you here. If we listen to all of it, I think they'll go away at last. God knows I need to sell this house, but in good conscience I can't allow anyone else to move in here until this is resolved. Especially not a nice young couple like you. I certainly understand your fear—but if you don't stay and continue, then I can't let you have the house."

"That's just fine with me," the young woman said in a quavering voice as she turned toward the living room. "I'm out of here."

John Luft grabbed his wife's arm, pulled her back beside him. His bright eyes reflected the flickering candles as he looked around at the others, then finally settled his gaze on Elsie. "You're saying that this could be like a kind of exorcism? If the ghosts tell Mary what's on their minds, and Mary tells us, then they'll leave the house when you leave?"

It was Madame Bellarossa who answered. "That is correct."

"Then let's do it," Luft said, virtually pushing his wife back down into the chair she had jumped out of when Mary had collapsed.

"Hoo, boy," Harry Parker said, flapping the ends of his shirt in an effort to speed the drying of the blood that had soaked it, "I've been exposing phoney-baloney occult scams for most of my life, but I've never seen anything like this. I don't mind telling you I'd really like to see how it all comes out."

"No," Garth said as he walked back to where Mary was still sitting on the floor, looking dazed. He put a hand under her arm, helped her to her feet. "Let's not do it."

The others stared at him in stunned silence, which Mary finally broke. "Garth? What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry, Elsie," Garth said to the old woman. "It's your house, and your ghosts, but it's my wife they're using as a mouthpiece—and they knocked her to the floor to get her attention. That's a bit rough, and it's not at all my idea of how to start a pleasant conversation. Neither is making Harry bleed. If they want to talk to me, that's fine, but I'm not letting Mary sit back down at that table. The only hand she's going to hold for the rest of the evening is mine."

"Garth," Mary said, a quiet urgency in her voice, "it's all right. I want to do it—for Elsie, and for John and Linda. I want to help end all this. They don't mean to hurt me; they don't want to hurt anybody. They're just very *angry*. They want to be heard."

"That is correct," Madame Bellarossa whispered.

Garth shook his head. "If they need a lawyer, then let them talk through me."

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"They won't. They'll only talk through me."

"Why?"

"I don't know," Mary replied, then put her arms around him and gently kissed him on the cheek the way she had when she'd drifted up from sleep and found him awake the night after he had discovered Elsie cowering outside their back door. "Who are you calling?" she had asked dreamily.

"Elsie."

"Garth, it's past midnight."

"That's why I'm calling. I've been trying to reach her for the last fifteen minutes. There's no answer."

"Remember she said she heard the phone ringing all the time. Now she's probably not answering the phone, even when it really is ringing. With Elsie, I'd say that's a healthy sign."

Garth hung up, waited ten seconds, then dialed again. "I'm worried about her. I want to talk to her, make sure she's all right."

"Garth, let the poor woman *sleep*. If her ghosts were hassling her, she'd be over here just like she was last night. You're starting to act like you believe in them."

"I believe in terror, Mary," Garth said evenly, hanging up the phone and rising. "That's what I saw in Elsie. I had an uncle who died from what he believed, and I don't want the same thing to happen to Elsie. I'll be back in a little while."

He quickly dressed in jeans, a sweatshirt, and sneakers, took the flashlight from a shelf in the kitchen, then went out into the night, down to the beach. A full moon painted the river silver and silhouetted the Victorian mansion that loomed up out of the darkness into a sky of midnight blue as he approached it. He knocked on the door, waited, then knocked again, louder. When there was no answer, he retrieved the spare key he knew Elsie kept behind a potted plant on the porch, opened the door, and let himself in. He started as he swept the beam of his flashlight across the hardwood floor of the foyer and a moving, shiny carpet of cockroaches skittered away in all directions. There was a strong smell of rotting garbage.

"Elsie?!" he called. "Don't be afraid! It's Garth! I've come to make sure you're all right!"

There was no answer. He reached to his left and flipped a light switch, but the house remained shrouded in darkness. From somewhere upstairs, barely perceptible, came flopping and scratching sounds, as if someone or something with long nails was hopping around and slapping bare hands or feet against the floor. He went

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to the foot of the stairs and the flopping and scratching sounds grew more pronounced.

"Elsie?!"

There was another flop, the crash of a lamp or dish hitting the floor, and then he heard a soft moan. He immediately bounded up the stairs, heading for the old woman's bedroom on the second floor. The door was closed. He yanked it open, stepped into the room.

Garth Frederickson was a man who had faced death a hundred times, and he no longer feared anything, but he was thoroughly startled when something slimy, soft, and heavy smacked into the side of his head and claws raked his cheek. He stumbled and went down to one knee as the thing fell off him and leaped away into the darkness, landing fifteen feet away with a sharp slapping sound. But the shock passed as he realized almost immediately what the thing was, and even as his heartbeat rapidly began to return to normal, anger, swift-running and hot, rose in him.

He got back to his feet and swept the light around the room until the bright beam found Elsie huddled on the floor beside her bed, her arms wrapped around her. Her face was purple, and she was rapidly opening and closing her mouth in a desperate struggle to breathe.

"It's Garth, Elsie," he said, flashing the light on his face as he quickly went to her. He set the flashlight on a dresser, where it illuminated half the room, then lifted Elsie up and sat her on the edge of the bed. He braced one hand against her back, then gently pressed on her chest, released the pressure, pressed again. "Breathe, Elsie. Come on, now; breathe. I'm here now. Nobody's going to hurt you."

"The ghosts . . . "

"I'm pretty sure your ghosts have finished their work for the night and gone home. If they are still in the house, I guarantee I'll break their necks and make real ghosts out of them."

There was a scratching sound in the half of the room still in darkness, and then a heavy slap. The woman's eyes went wide, and she again began to hyperventilate.

"I'm going to take care of that in a minute," Garth said easily, "just as soon as I get you breathing normally. It won't do for you to have a heart attack. I'm here, and I'm not going to let anyone hurt you. I'm going to see what I can do about taking care of your ghost problem. Now take a deep breath and tell me you're not afraid any longer."

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Gradually, the woman's color and breathing became more regular. She took a deep, shuddering breath and slowly let it out. "I'm . . . not afraid."

"Tell me again."

"You're here, Garth. I'm not afraid."

"Good," Garth said as he rose from the bed and picked up the flashlight. "Now just sit there; be calm, and keep breathing normally."

He stepped to the foot of the bed, swept the light around the floor, finally spotted the thing in a corner. In three quick strides he was across the room. He bent down as the creature was about to leap away, gripped it firmly around the haunches, picked it up. Thick, powerful legs with webbed feet clawed at the air as the animal writhed in Garth's hand.

"Oh, my *God,*" Elsie said, putting her hands to her mouth. "What *is* it?!"

"Just what it looks like, and it certainly didn't come out of the Hudson. Do you need to use the bathroom right away?"

"I . . . don't think so."

"Good," Garth said evenly as he casually tossed the creature into the bathroom adjoining the bedroom, then closed the door. "I'll take care of it later."

"Do you believe me now about the ghosts, Garth?"

"I most certainly do, my dear, and I plan to do a little exorcising. Listen to me: I'm going downstairs to get the lights back on; it'll take me about five minutes. I want you to just sit where you are, keep taking deep breaths, and think happy thoughts. I'll be right back. Things are going to be all right now. Okay?"

"O . . . Okay."

The living carpet of cockroaches scattered from the beam of light as Garth descended from the second floor and crossed the living room, flipping light switches as he went. The smell of rotting garbage grew more pungent as he went down into the basement. He opened the circuit-breaker box and found all the switches, and the lights in the house came back on. Next he moved around the cavernous, dust-filled basement, brushing aside thick, intricate tapestries of cobwebs as he went. The wine cellar that hadn't been used in decades was empty, save for a mound of broken black plastic bags that was piled to waist height, spewing garbage. River rats as big as woodchucks scurried away as Garth swept the beam of his flashlight over the expanse of rotting food. He found a second cache of

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garbage in a tool room, and in another five minutes found an unlocked basement window. He locked the window, then went back up to the second floor, where he found Mary, dressed in jeans, sandals, and a baggy sweater, sitting on the bed next to Elsie.

"We owe our friend and neighbor an apology, Mary. She really has been haunted, and somebody did, in fact, touch her neck—probably after soaking his hand in ice water. Now I plan to do a little haunting of my own."

"What the hell is *that?!*" Mary said, almost jumping off the bed as the creature in the bathroom smacked against the door.

Garth opened the door, went into the bathroom, and once again grabbed the animal, which had landed in the bathtub. He brought it into the bedroom, held it up. "It's just a big frog."

Mary's eyes went wide as she stared at the creature, and she laughed nervously. "A *very* big frog!"

"It is that. I'd estimate this guy weighs upwards of fifteen pounds, and, unless it was stolen, it set Elsie's ghosts back about a thousand dollars. These big guys come from South America. You may remember a few years back when some guy imported one and tried to enter it in that famous frog-jumping contest. It was finally disqualified after a lawsuit, but not before it had eaten half the competition."

Mary shook her head. "Garth? I saw all the cockroaches downstairs, and the whole place reeks of garbage. You and I *do* know that Elsie keeps a clean house. What's going on here?"

"Elsie's going to tell us," Garth replied, tossing the giant frog back into the bathroom and once again closing the door. He went to the bed, put his hand on the old woman's shoulder. "Elsie, you said once before that you couldn't afford to, as you put it, sell the house for a song. But somebody has been trying to buy it for a song, haven't they?"

"Well, I don't . . . "

"Did somebody come to you and make an offer after the stories about this house appeared in the papers and you couldn't get any more buyers?"

Elsie brushed a wisp of white hair away from her eyes and looked up at Garth. "Yes—a really nice young couple. They came to see the house two or three times, looked all around from the attic to the basement. They made me an offer, but it was way too low. How did you know?"

"Being in this house must enhance my psychic powers. Elsie, I want you to tell me all you know about this nice young couple."

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She did, and in a few days Garth had compiled sufficient information from computerized bank files, motor-vehicle records, credit bureaus, former employers, real-estate agents, the former owner of the house in an expensive section of Westchester where John and Linda Luft now lived, and their current neighbors, to visit the Luft home, where there was a large For Sale sign stuck in the front lawn.

"John Luft?"

The young man who had answered the door stared at Garth, making no effort to hide the suspicion in his dark eyes. He had the look of a man who was suspicious of a lot of people, and with good reason.

"Yeah. Who are you?"

"My name's Garth Frederickson. I'm a friend of Elsie Manning. She asked me to come around and speak to you."

At the mention of Elsie's name, the suspicion left John Luft's eyes, instantly replaced by an expression of innocence and charm. "Elsie Manning. What a lovely old lady. How is she?"

"Actually, she's not doing too well—that house is really too much for her. She's very anxious to sell it, and you and your wife were the last people to express an interest. That's why I'm here."

Now other things moved in Luft's eyes, greed and triumph. He started to laugh nervously, cut himself off, licked his thin lips. "Uh, sure. Come on in."

Garth entered the house and followed John Luft, who was walking jauntily and snapping his fingers, into a living room decorated with huge, garish, abstract paintings that Garth judged were expensive, but of dubious artistic merit.

"You want a drink or something?" Luft continued, motioning for Garth to sit down in an overstuffed chair.

"No, thanks," Garth replied, easing himself down into the chair and casually crossing his legs.

"Garth Frederickson," Luft said as he sat down on a sofa and studied the rangy, powerfully built man with shoulder-length, thinning, wheat-colored hair and soulful brown eyes who was also studying him. "You're pretty well known, right?"

"Am I? I don't have the slightest idea."

"Yeah. I've seen your picture in the papers. You're a private investigator. You're married to Mary Tree—my wife and I love her music, buy all her records—and you've got a weird little brother who's even more famous than you are."

Garth smiled thinly. "It sounds like you've got me pegged."

"Uh, how come Elsie sent a private detective to talk to me?"

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"She didn't send a private detective; I'm here as her friend and neighbor. She asked me to speak with you on her behalf."

"She's . . . ready to sell the house?"

"Yes. Are you and your wife still interested in buying it?"

Luft again licked his lips, swallowed, cleared his throat. "Is she willing to accept the last offer we made her?"

"Two hundred thousand dollars, yes."

The other man leaned back on the sofa, grinned. "How about that?"

"You've got yourself quite a bargain, Mr. Luft; two hundred thousand dollars for a house worth three quarters of a million. Considering the neighborhood you're in, you'll probably get more than enough from the sale of this house to buy the one in Cairn outright."

"Yeah, well, Linda and I have been pretty lucky with our real-estate investments. We got this house at a good price, but for a very good reason. We were ready to go into hock up to our eyebrows to buy it, and then our building inspector discovered not only that the well on the property is polluted with toxic waste, but that there was a big termite infestation—lots of structural damage. There were other major problems as well. The owner was so disgusted that he just wanted out. He accepted our second offer. We've put a lot of money into fixing up this house."

"I'll bet you have."

"Had to take out a huge home-equity loan to pay for the repairs. That's why we couldn't afford to offer Elsie any more than we did. But then, I figure we're doing her a favor. What with what happened with the court case and all, she's really in a jam. Nobody else wants to buy it, and she needs to go to a nursing home."

"Aren't you a little nervous about moving into a haunted house?"

Luft laughed—a kind of high-pitched giggle. "Are you putting me on? Don't tell me *you* believe in ghosts."

"Elsie's willing to sell you the house, for the price you offered—but there's one condition. If it's not met, there's no sale."

Luft's eyes narrowed. "What condition?"

"You and I may not believe in ghosts, but Elsie does. And she feels responsible for the ghosts in that house. You might say she wants to clean up her home before she sells it to anybody—especially a nice young couple like you and your wife. You and I know it's crazy, but she insists on it. She wants to exorcise the ghosts, and she intends to do it with a séance. You and your wife must agree to be a part of it, since you're the ones who'll be moving into the house."

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Luft's dark eyes shone with amusement. "She wants us to meet her *ghosts?!*"

"She insists on it. The séance will be tomorrow night, eleven o'clock. I hope you and your wife can be there."

"Can we *be* there?!" Luft threw back his head and laughed, held his stomach. "God, we wouldn't miss it for the *world!* Wait until I tell Linda we're going to a séance tomorrow night in order to clean the ghosts out of our new home. She'll *love* it!"

"I hope so," Garth replied evenly, and wondered now, as he held the woman's hand in the restored circle at the candlelit table, if Linda Luft and her husband were enjoying the experience as much as the man had believed they would. The woman's hand was clammy, trembling, slick with sweat.

"I feel them coming closer, Mary," Madame Bellarossa whispered.

"Yes," Mary said in a soft, dreamy voice. "I feel them too . . . very close. They're so angry—but not with Elsie. And they're not the ones who've been doing the terrible things to her. There are others . . . undead. Not dead. Greed; it's all about greed, incredible selfishness, a young couple who think they're entitled to anything they want just because they want it, no matter who's hurt. I see money, pieces of paper . . . stocks! Yes! The man used to be a stockbroker, but he was fired for churning accounts, and suspicion of embezzlement. He stole . . . Wait! I see something . . . "

Garth looked up as a light began to glow in the darkness near the ceiling. The light resolved into a rectangle, and then became two figures in hooded robes, bathed in moonlight, approaching the house from the beach, opening a basement window. Linda Luft snatched her sweat-soaked hand from Garth's grip.

"That's enough!" John Luft shouted at almost the exact moment when the giant frog sailed out of the darkness and landed in the center of the table, knocking over half the candles, then hopped away toward the living room.

Garth rose from his chair, reached for the light switch on the wall behind him. The lights in the dining room came on. John and Linda Luft, their faces the color of old parchment, were standing back a pace from their overturned chairs, almost directly beneath the suspended screen with its mounted, remote-controlled rear projector, gaping at the people around the table who stared back at them now with undisguised hostility and contempt.

"I guess this is the part where we find out if the butler did it," Mary said in a low, steely voice.

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"I don't have a butler," Elsie said, her voice quavering with rage as she glared at the couple across the table from her.

"That wasn't us!" John Luft shouted, pointing a trembling finger at the screen above his head. "We didn't put the robes on un—!"

"Shut up!" Linda Luft screamed at her husband, punching him in the chest with her fist. "You *idiot!"*

John Luft grew even paler, took another step backward, then looked over at Harry Parker, who seemed to have lost interest in the proceedings now that the illusion he had helped create had been played out. He had taken off his shirt and was removing an apparatus of tubes and blood-filled capsules from around his lower waist. "Actually, I kind of like this house," the big man mumbled to no one in particular. "It has atmosphere. If the frog's part of the deal, I may buy it myself."

Elsie slowly rose from her chair, pointed a finger at the Lufts. Her entire body was trembling with rage. "How *could* you?!" she said. "How could you be so mean?"

Now it was Linda Luft's turn to lose control. Her face turned crimson as she stepped toward Elsie and screamed, "You shut up too, you old bitch! What do you want with the house or the money? You're going to die soon, you hag! Why can't you let somebody else enjoy it?"

John Luft gripped his wife's shoulders, pulled her back from the table as he glared at Garth. "You set us up, Frederickson!" he said, his voice shimmering with both anger and fear.

"Set you up?" Garth replied mildly. "You're damned lucky Elsie didn't have a heart attack; you'd be facing manslaughter charges." He paused, nodded toward Jeffrey Bond, who had a deep frown on his face as he stared at the young couple. "I introduced you to Jeff, but I don't think I mentioned that he's the Cairn Chief of Police. Madame Bellarossa is his wife, and her real name is Carol. She's quite a well-known actress. Without her wig and makeup, I'm sure you'd recognize her."

"You can't prove a thing!" the man shouted at Jeffrey Bond.

"That remains to be seen," the police chief replied evenly. "We have a videotape of these proceedings, for what that's worth. Also, my friend Garth found the fellow you paid to mess up that guy's house that you're living in now, and then pose as a building inspector to give him the bad news. It seems he kept the sales slips for the acid you had him buy and inject into the wood joints to make it look like he had termite damage. The police across the river have a

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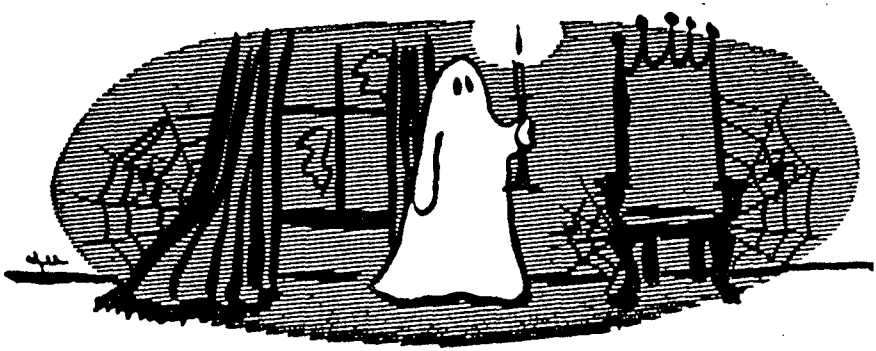
warrant out for your arrest. In addition to that, there'll be a process server around to see you in the morning. You're looking at a whopping lawsuit, in addition to any criminal penalties. I think I'll let Westchester have you for now, and that will give me time to ponder all the charges I'm going to hit you with when they're done."

The lights in the living room came on. John and Linda Luft started, then wheeled around to see two uniformed policemen and the two young stagehands, friends of Carol Bond, who had handled the special effects for the evening's performance standing in the archway between the two rooms. The giant frog was over in a corner contentedly munching on what appeared to be a cockroach, a survivor from the exterminator's visit earlier in the day.

"The charges won't stick!" John Luft screamed at Garth as he and his wife were handcuffed. "They can't prove anything! You're going to be sorry! I swear I'll get you!"

"Boo," Garth said.



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a *NEW* Rand story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

One of the things we can always depend on in a story from veteran Edward D. Hoch is careful research. Whether his tale concerns the history of the Old West or conditions on a freighter bound for Istanbul, he's sure to have come up with interesting facts that we won't soon forget . . .

SPY AT SEA

by EDWARD D. HOCH

"She sails at midnight on the *Happy Moon,*" the man in the striped robe told Rand. "It's a small coastal freighter bound for Istanbul."

They were seated in a dingy sailors' café along the waterfront in Karachi, Pakistan, a city Rand had never dreamed of visiting even in his nightmares. He had come there on a mission for an old friend, a Turkish diplomat who had once done him a great favor. A few days earlier, the diplomat had phoned him at home in England and said simply, "My daughter is in trouble, somehow involving drugs." Rand had known it was time to pay back his debt.

Even the slim guidebook he read on the plane could hardly prepare Rand for Karachi, a sprawling metropolitan area where finance and commerce mingled with an illegal trade in everything from women and drugs to weapons of war. More than five million people moved through its crowded streets, many of them Muslim refugees fleeing oppression and violence in India. Rand had not found Sishane Kemal, the young woman he sought, but after a day of tracking down leads he'd ended up at the sailors' café, across the table from a man of indeterminate nationality known as Grantor.

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"They say you know everyone in the city," Rand told him, slipping a few British pound notes across the table.

"The *Happy Moon,*" the slender man in the robe repeated. "I do not know Sishane Kemal, but the ship carries a few passengers. Her name is on the list. Here along the waterfront we keep track of such things. I'll give you the dock number."

"What cargo does the *Happy Moon* carry?" Rand wanted to know.

Grantor shrugged. "Heavy equipment for oil drilling. Who knows what else? Russian weapons abandoned in Afghanistan?"

"Drugs?"

"They say with the new European free trade the borders are quite open. Heroin is already pouring in through Turkey."

Rand nodded. "And the *Happy Moon* is bound for Istanbul."

The bartender came over to see if they wanted another bottle of the cheap Malaysian beer they'd been drinking. "I have to be going," Rand said, standing up. He offered Grantor a few more bills. "This is for the beer. I appreciate your help."

The man nodded, closing his long fingers over the money. It was not until Rand had pushed his way out of the crowded café into the afternoon heat that he remembered Grantor had forgotten to give him the dock number. He went back inside and made for the dim corner where the man in the striped robe still sat over his beer.

"What's the dock number?" he asked, and when the man didn't respond Rand placed a hand on his shoulder.

It wasn't until the head lolled to one side that he saw the blood and the deep gash where Grantor's throat had been only minutes earlier.

The captain of the *Happy Moon* was a dark-skinned man named Rodríguez whose weathered face bore testimony to many years' exposure to burning sun and wind-swept salt air. He stood at the bottom of the ship's gangplank, hands on either railing as if barring the way to Rand and anyone else with the temerity to venture aboard. "We're a small coastal freighter," he said. "Don't have much room for passengers."

It was past sundown, only a few hours before sailing, and Rand had finally located the ship at an auxiliary dock down beyond the main loading area. The *Happy Moon* was a 200-foot freighter whose rusty hull shouted neglect. Captain Rodríguez seemed truly surprised that Rand or anyone else would want to sail with him on such a vessel.

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"I want to go to Istanbul," Rand explained.

"You can fly there in a few hours. You'll be days aboard this tub."

"I like the sea air, and I don't need to be there for a week. Tell me, how much is a one-way passage?"

The captain sighed and told him the facts. "We're a Panamanian-registered ship with a crew of nine. There are four spare cabins for passengers and two are presently occupied. You'll find there are no frills on this vessel. You'll take your meals with the crew and pretty much shift for yourself." He mentioned a sum in British pounds for one-way passage. It seemed high but Rand wasn't in a position to dicker.

"I'll take it."

"Cash. I don't take credit cards."

"I'll cash some traveler's checks and get my bag. I'll be back in a half-hour."

"We'll sail at midnight," Rodríguez reminded him. "High tide. I don't wait for stragglers."

Rand returned in plenty of time and handed over his money to the captain. A young Pakistani crewman who spoke little English showed him to his cabin. Earlier in the evening, when he first arrived at dockside, Rand had observed a young woman boarding the ship. From what Grantor had told him, and what subsequently happened to the man, Rand was convinced he was telling the truth about Sishane Kemal's whereabouts. Her motives for the voyage were another matter, but Rand wasn't concerned with that at the moment. He was on the ship with her, and perhaps during the days of the cruise to Istanbul he'd gain her confidence enough to learn what trouble she was involved in. Certainly her father back in Istanbul hadn't known.

He went out to the railing at midnight to watch the ship cast off its lines and move slowly away from the dock. There was no sign of Sishane Kemal or the other passenger. Presently, when the ship was in the open channel to the Arabian Sea, Rand went topside and found Captain Rodríguez relaxing with a foul-smelling cigar, talking with another of the crew members.

"Mr. Rand, this is my first mate, Gunther Sallis."

The man was thin and pale, though his handshake was vigorous. "Pleased to have you aboard," he said with an accent that might have been German. "It is a clear, starry night."

Indeed the sky above them seemed clustered with stars, more than he'd ever remembered seeing back in England where the city

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lights often washed out the beauty of the heavens. "Are the seas calm this time of year?" Rand asked.

The cigar tip glowed as Rodríguez took a puff. "The rainy season comes later in the summer. Right now all is tranquil."

Gunther Sallis excused himself and returned to the wheelhouse. "Your crew is a mixture of nationalities," Rand observed.

"Gunther and I are the only Europeans. The other seven are all Pakistani or Afghan. Afghanistan is a landlocked country and virtually all of its trade passes through Karachi. Its people are drawn here to the sea."

"When the sea is calm it must be a pleasant voyage."

The captain shrugged. "There are always problems. The Gulf War was very close. We were stopped and boarded by the Americans many times. Now that the war is over I must think about getting a new first mate. Gunther has told me he is sick. He has the early stages of AIDS, and will not be with me on many more trips."

"It's a terrible illness," Rand agreed. He was pleased that the captain was warming to him after their first encounter at the gangplank earlier in the evening. "Tell me about my fellow passengers. I haven't seen either of them yet."

Rodríguez shrugged. "I know nothing about them. A young Turkish woman and a Frenchman. You'll probably see them at breakfast." He tossed the butt of his cigar into the sea. "Passengers are a nuisance, but Gunther looks after their needs, sees that a crew member makes their beds and cleans their cabins. That's all we can do, besides feed them." He went back to the wheelhouse.

Rand was up early, unaccustomed to the motion of even a relatively calm sea voyage. The young Pakistani who'd shown him to his cabin the previous evening, Multan, was mopping the deck outside the cabins when he poked his head out.

"Is breakfast being served yet?"

The young man gave him a white-toothed grin. "Soon. Seven o'clock."

"Hello, there," someone said. "English, aren't you?"

Rand turned to see a middle-aged man with graying hair carrying a pair of binoculars and a book. He introduced himself and the man responded, "Pierre Claquer. Is this your first voyage on the *Happy Moon?*"

"It is," Rand acknowledged. "What do you see with the binoculars?"

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"Shore birds." He held up the book and Rand could see it was a guide to birds, printed in French. "The ship remains within sight of the coast during much of its journey, especially through the Red Sea. It's a perfect opportunity to study the shore birds."

He offered the glasses to Rand, who put them to his eyes and adjusted them to see the circling white birds off the distant shoreline. "What are those, gulls?"

"Terns. Gulls are rarely found in tropic areas like this. The two are related, however." He slipped the binoculars into their leather case. "Are you going down to breakfast?"

"Multan said they served at seven."

"It's just about that now."

The ship's mess was a stateroom barely large enough to accommodate a long table with six chairs on each side. Captain Rodríguez was already there, along with a couple of the crewmen. An Afghan cook served them bacon and eggs with some unidentifiable side dish that Rand chose not to investigate. The coffee was a bit weak but passable.

He was halfway through breakfast when the door opened to admit a handsome young woman of dark complexion and piercing blue eyes. She wore a long gossamer scarf, almost a sari, over more casual attire. "Miss Sishane Kemal," the captain intoned, "these are our other passengers—Mr. Claquer from Marseilles, France, and Mr. Rand from Reading, England."

Both of them stood and shook hands with her. "Please be seated," she insisted, speaking good English. "I didn't mean to disrupt breakfast with my appearance."

Rand knew she was twenty-six years old, and she looked about that age. Though he hadn't seen her father in years, he could make out some resemblance to the elder Kemal. Relieved at this confirmation, he allowed himself the luxury of wondering what he would have done if the woman on board the *Happy Moon* had been someone entirely different.

Her presence seemed to spark the conversation, and Pierre Claquer immediately asked what had brought her on board. "A sea voyage," she said with a smile. "I'm returning home to Istanbul. I don't like to fly and I didn't wish to travel by train across Iran. This was the only alternative. But how about you?"

He smiled in return. "I am a magistrate on holiday. Birds are my hobby, and this voyage is the perfect way to observe unfamiliar

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shore birds. There are no cruise lines that travel on exactly this route."

"And you, Mr. Rand?"

"I'm retired," he said simply. "Cruising the world."

"This is a slow way to do it," Captain Rodríguez told them. "It's about four thousand miles to Istanbul through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. With luck we can make about six hundred miles a day, so the journey will take us almost a week."

"I'm in no hurry," Sishane replied.

After breakfast he followed her out on deck, but there was no opportunity for conversation. The first mate, Sallis, appeared to chat with her and then she moved a deck chair into the sun and sat down, closing her eyes at once.

It was not until the following day, the second of the voyage, as they were passing close to the coast of Oman, that Rand found his opportunity. He came out on deck in the afternoon to find Sishane Kemal standing by the railing staring at the barren coastline. "Not much there except desert," he remarked.

She turned to him. "Is it Oman?"

"Yes. Like many other Arab countries it exists primarily on oil money."

"You know a great deal about the Middle East. What did you do before you retired?"

"I was a bureaucrat in London. Dull but necessary."

Sishane was wearing a striped top and shorts in the balmy tropic air. She might have been any tourist on a Mediterranean cruise line. "My father was stationed in London for a time. Efes Kemal—perhaps you knew him."

"I may have heard the name," Rand murmured vaguely.

She sat down on a deck chair and picked up a book she'd brought along. It seemed to be a history of the impact of oil on Middle Eastern affairs. "Not exactly light reading," he commented.

"When your father is a diplomat it forces you into a certain awareness of global affairs."

That still didn't explain what she was doing on board the *Happy Moon*. But she seemed immersed in her book and Rand could see the brief conversation had come to an end. He spent the remainder of the afternoon chatting with Pierre Claquer about his travels in search of exotic birds.

* * *

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On the third day out, as the *Happy Moon* was rounding the Arabian peninsula in preparation for entering the Red Sea, a small fishing boat came out from the shore to meet them. Rand was at the railing watching every move, though he hardly expected any sort of drug transfer would be made in broad daylight. The crewman Multan climbed down the accommodation ladder to speak with the fisherman but returned empty-handed.

"What was that all about?" Rand asked the first mate.

"The fishermen come out to sell us their catches," Sallis explained. "They had nothing good today, or their price was too high. Multan does well dealing with them."

A bit later in the day another fishing boat appeared and the scene was repeated. This time Multan passed over some money and came back up the ladder holding a half-dozen good-sized fish. He wore a broad grin as he passed them to the waiting cook. "A good day! These are newly caught."

They dined on the fish that evening. Rand had to admit they were good, but when told they were a member of the herring family he decided they must be red herring, hardly large enough to conceal a profitable cache of heroin.

Still, the troubling thought persisted that the "trouble" which had concerned Efes Kemal had something to do with drugs. Either Sishane was smuggling them personally or she was accompanying a large shipment on the *Happy Moon* itself. Later that evening, by trying his stateroom key in the other locks, Rand made the interesting discovery that one key fit the locks on all four passenger compartments. Both Sishane and Claquer might return to their cabins at any time, so he did not attempt to enter either of their rooms just yet. That could come later, if it seemed necessary.

Awakening on the fourth morning, Rand saw that they had entered the Red Sea and were sailing now in a northwesterly direction. After breakfast a couple of the crew members decided to go for a swim and Sishane went along. Claquer got out his camera and joined them. "Don't go in the water," Rand cautioned her. "It may not be healthy."

She smiled back at him as she went down the ladder to the boat they'd lowered. "Thank you for the advice, Mr. Rand. That sounds exactly like something my father would say."

Her remark troubled him. Had he somehow given himself away? While she and the Frenchman were both off the ship he decided to risk looking through their cabins. The key worked easily in Sis-

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hane's door and he entered to find the stateroom a duplicate of his own. Her bunk had already been made up by Multan, though his own remained undone. Most of her belongings were still in two suitcases, and he went through them quickly—a couple of books in Turkish, another in English, a leather pouch containing a makeup kit and perfume, another pouch with a dozen large brown bottles of assorted vitamin pills, a travel wallet containing her passport and visas. In the tiny closet were the dresses and sports clothes she'd been wearing on the trip. A few toilet articles were in the tiny bathroom.

There was no sign of drugs. Rand went back and unscrewed the top from one of the vitamin bottles, but the small white pills looked harmless enough. Finally he put everything back and carefully left the cabin, making certain he wasn't seen by a crewman.

He glanced over the railing and saw that the swimmers were still down there, with Sishane and Pierre Claquer watching them from the little boat. Rand took out his key again and entered Claquer's cabin. He found a half-dozen bird books, additional camera equipment, and nothing to cast doubt on the stated reason for the Frenchman's presence aboard the *Happy Moon.*

Back on deck he decided the two searches had been a waste of time. If Efes Kemal's daughter was in trouble involving drugs or anything else, it was far from apparent. He'd searched the passenger cabins and found nothing suspicious.

Two of the passenger cabins, anyway. He hadn't bothered with the empty one.

He walked down to the aft cabin and tried his key in the lock. It worked, just like the others. He'd expected a bare bunk, without sheets or blankets, but instead there was a standard gray blanket wrapped around someone. He caught his breath, freezing in the doorway, conjuring up visions of a secret passenger whom no one had seen.

When no movement came from the bunk he went a step closer. Finally he was near enough to lift the blanket. It was the crewman, Multan, and he was dead. His throat had been slashed in the same manner as that man Grantor back at the Karachi café.

He could not admit to Captain Rodríguez that he'd been searching the cabins when he found the dead man, but neither did he feel he could simply walk away quickly as he'd done in Karachi. There, at least, he'd known one of the other café patrons would soon discover

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the victim. Here it could be days. The murderer had obviously put him in the empty cabin to delay discovery.

After a few moments' thought Rand decided on a compromise. He went out of the cabin but left the door ajar. Surely one of the crew members would notice it and glance inside. Then he went up to the bridge and conversed with Captain Rodríguez about the progress of the voyage.

"We're making good time," he suggested, peering at a chart showing the ship's present position.

"Very good," Rodríguez agreed. "Here in the Red Sea it's usually quite calm at this time of year."

A few minutes later their conversation was interrupted by Sallis, the first mate. "Bad trouble, Captain. Multan's been killed."

"Killed?"

"Murdered. His throat was cut. Fandul just came on board from a swim and noticed the door to the empty passenger cabin was open. He looked in and found Multan on the bunk, dead."

"Take the wheel," he ordered Sallis. "I'll go have a look."

Rand drifted down after him, trying to stay out of the way. The others all seemed to be clustered around the cabin door. "What happened?" he asked Sishane innocently.

"It's one of the crewmen, young Multan. He's been killed."

"That's terrible!"

He moved away but she followed. In a low voice she told him, "The time for games is over, Mr. Rand. My father sent you, didn't he?"

He glanced at Pierre Claquer, only a few feet away. "We can't talk here. Meet me on the fantail after dinner."

There was much debate over dinner about whether the ship should put in to the nearest port for a police investigation of the killing, but the captain argued it had occurred in international waters and was hardly within the jurisdiction of Ethiopia or Yemen, the countries on either side of them at the moment. No one had a desire to become involved with either country, and it seemed best to leave the decision and the responsibility in Captain Rodríguez's hands. Orders were given that the body be kept on ice and delivered to the Turkish police when the ship reached its destination.

After dinner Rand strolled to the stern of the ship, to the rounded area that jutted out from the rest. Presently Sishane Kemal joined him. "Someone aboard this vessel is a killer," she told him bluntly.

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"I think that truth is in everyone's mind," he agreed. "There are only eight crew members left, plus the three of us. Not many suspects."

"Why would someone kill him?"

"I thought you could tell me."

"My father sent you, didn't he?"

"What gave you that idea?"

She stepped close to him, her eyes almost level with his. "Oh, I remember the name Rand. My father used to tell stories about you, the darling of Britain's Department of Concealed Communications, the man from Double-C."

"That was a different person."

"It was you. He even showed me a picture of you once. You've always been something of a hero to him."

"I've been retired from Double-C for sixteen years."

"But not retired from the world of foreign intrigue. I recognized you the moment we met, Mr. Rand. What are you doing here?"

There was no point in lying further. "Your father is very concerned about you. He believes you're in some sort of trouble involving drugs." She frowned at that but said nothing. He continued, "I was told you were in Karachi. I located a man named Grantor down by the waterfront who was familiar with the sailings. He told me you were on board this vessel. He was killed shortly after that—"

"What?"

"—possibly by the same person who killed Multan. The throat wounds were similar."

"Why would anyone kill him?"

"Because he talked to me?" Rand speculated. "Because he mentioned your name? What are you involved in, Sishane?"

"Nothing. Not drugs, certainly."

"These ships often carry heroin headed for Europe. With the end of trade restrictions—"

"I told you, I know nothing about heroin or anything like that. I never heard of this man Grantor who you claim was killed because of me."

"What were you doing in Pakistan that so concerned your father?"

"If you must know, I'm writing a study of population problems in the twenty-first century. Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh seemed good places to begin."

"You were in Bangladesh too?"

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She nodded. "Just last week. It is a tiny country which, if projections are correct, will have more people than the United States by the year two thousand twenty-five."

"How did you happen to choose this ship for your return home?"

"I'd heard my father mention it once. When I learned it was in port to pick up oil-drilling machinery from Afghanistan, I decided this would be a good route home."

Rand couldn't help feeling she was lying, but he had no evidence with which to confront her. Before he could say anything else, Gunther Sallis spotted them on the fantail and strolled over to join them.

"Nice night," the first mate said. "This is the only time of day the heat is bearable."

"What will happen when we dock in Istanbul?" Sishane wanted to know. "Will we all be held for questioning?"

"I suppose so. I've never had anything like this happen on one of my ships. However, Captain Rodríguez hopes to avoid the Istanbul bureaucracy by reporting the killing at Bodrum, our first stop." For Rand's benefit he added, "It's a port on the Aegean Sea, just past the island of Rhodes. We'll be off-loading some of our cargo there."

"Well," Sishane decided, "I'm going to my cabin. I'll see you both in the morning."

Rand followed soon after. No one seemed to linger on deck with a killer on board. He locked himself in his cabin and then, remembering the business with the keys, placed a chair against the door as an added precaution.

At breakfast on the fifth morning the captain announced that they were picking up speed, hoping to reach the Suez Canal that evening, several hours ahead of schedule. He was obviously nervous about the situation, anxious to reach the relative safety of port. They were sailing up the middle of the Red Sea, and Claquer was already grumbling that they were too far from either shore to observe any birds.

"All I can see are a few terns, and even they don't come out this far," the Frenchman complained.

Sishane Kemal came to breakfast late and seemed unusually distressed. Rand assumed she'd slept poorly because of the killing, but when he started to leave she tugged on his sleeve. "I have to speak with you," she said quietly.

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He waited for her on deck. She was dressed today in a gray sweatsuit she'd worn once before for jogging around the deck. "What is it?" Rand asked as she joined him, her face showing a certain urgency.

"I want to show you something in my cabin."

He followed her in silence as she unlocked the door and entered. She went to the bunk and lifted the blanket and sheets from the mattress. There was a large brownish spot that he recognized at once as dried blood. "When did you find this?"

"When I awakened this morning. The sheet had pulled out and I saw it right away. I think Multan was killed in here."

"It certainly looks like it," Rand agreed. "Is anything missing from your cabin?"

"Not that I've noticed. I'd better go through everything." She started to do that, but paused after a moment and sank to the bed, burying her face in her hands. "To think that I slept on it!"

"You are in trouble, aren't you?" Rand asked, putting a hand on her shoulder as an uncle might. "Your father was right."

"This ship—I don't know what's going on."

"Rodríguez says we'll be through the Suez tonight. Tomorrow it should be smooth sailing in the Mediterranean."

It was a day when they all seemed to avoid one another, and Rand noticed that even Claquer had forsaken his bird watching to remain close to his cabin. Everyone was nervous, and when fishermen approached the ship in midafternoon they were waved away.

Rand took the opportunity to slip below deck. Pretending he wanted to visit the engine room, he went instead to the cargo hold toward the bow. If he was expecting to find heavy burlap bales of morphine base or some other narcotic, he was disappointed. The sturdy wooden crates were obviously built for heavy machinery, and oil-drilling equipment seemed as likely as anything. Odd, though, that he'd never heard of Afghanistan as an oil-producing nation. Returning to the main deck, he asked Captain Rodríguez about this.

"You said you were carrying oil-drilling equipment from Afghanistan, but they have no oil."

"Naturally not," the captain answered logically. "That is why they have no need of the equipment. They are selling it to Turkey, which does have oil."

Rand went back to his cabin and rested, thinking again about the trouble that involved Sishane Kemal.

* * *

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They cleared the canal just at dawn. Rand and his two fellow passengers stood at the railing watching the Egyptian landscape give way at last to the broad reaches of the Mediterranean. The air felt a bit cooler here, and everyone seemed to revive. Perhaps their spirits were better only because they were nearing their destination ahead of schedule. The captain explained it over breakfast.

"We should dock at Bodrum around midnight, twelve hours ahead of schedule. If the tides are right we can dock at once and unload our cargo at dawn. Meanwhile, I will deal with the authorities regarding the unfortunate Multan. I expect they'll want to question everyone, but we should be on our way without undue delay."

Once out into the blustery sea, the voyage turned rough. Sishane was too ill to eat lunch and by dinnertime Pierre Claquer was looking pale too. Rand asked the first mate if the rough seas would continue.

"They should calm down after dark," Sallis told him. "This is nothing."

He was right in his prediction. As darkness descended, the winds abated. But something else took their place. Gazing off at the horizon, Rand thought he saw a warship about the size of a destroyer moving in on them. But he couldn't be sure, and when the darkness was complete he saw no navigation lights.

At around ten o'clock Rand was standing on the fantail with Sishane. The calming seas had settled her stomach and she'd come out on deck for a few breaths of night air. "I feel better," she admitted. "I've never been a good sailor."

"And yet you wouldn't fly or take the train back. How did you get to India and those other places to begin with?"

"I flew," she admitted rather sheepishly, "but I didn't like it. When I met Gunther Sallis and he mentioned the ship, I remembered my father recommending it to someone once."

"Where did you meet Sallis?"

"At a research laboratory near Bombay. Indian scientists are among the best in the world in some fields."

"This had to do with your population studies?"

She nodded. "Methods of birth control—"

She was interrupted by a sudden commotion from the ship's bridge. Almost at once there were two explosions in the water about a mile ahead of them, lighting up the sea for a fiery instant. "What in hell was that?" Rand wanted to know.

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Rodríguez came out of the pilot house and called down to them. "Stay calm! A Turkish destroyer has fired warning shots across our bow. We're being boarded."

"In the middle of the night?" Sishane asked. "What is this?"

The ship's searchlights were turned on, and at once they saw a pair of rubber boats approaching off the starboard side, a half-dozen black-clad men in each. One of the crewmen, Fandul, saw them too, and appeared on deck with a rifle. As he raised it to his shoulder, Rand moved to stop him. But Pierre Claquer was faster.

He had appeared from somewhere holding a heavy Luger pistol. He yanked the rifle out of Fandul's hands and threw it to the deck. "Put up your hands!" he ordered. "This vessel is in the hands of the Turkish Navy and the Drug Enforcement Administration."

The joint force of Turkish and American investigators swarmed aboard, fanning out immediately to search the ship. Captain Rodríguez climbed down from the bridge and offered a mild protest. "You could have waited until we docked," he grumbled.

The man who seemed in charge, an American named McNeil, answered simply, "You might have dumped your cargo. It happened with a ship last month."

"We carry only oil-drilling equipment."

McNeil turned to the erstwhile bird watcher. "What did you discover, Claquer?"

"Not much. One of their crew got his throat cut two days ago. The captain hasn't reported it yet."

"It happened in international waters," the captain insisted. "I was waiting until our first port."

McNeil, a slender man with graying hair, seemed more interested in his mission. "We'll want to search the compartment where your anchor chains are stored. Found two tons of morphine base in one awhile ago."

"Search all you want. You'll find nothing."

Rand followed the American when he moved away from the group to converse with Claquer. "Since when do Americans have authority to act in Turkish waters?" he asked.

McNeil studied him before responding. "The Drug Enforcement Administration has been working with the Turkish police for more than a year, trying to shut down the two major routes of the narcotics smugglers, across eastern Turkey and here in the Mediterranean. There have been some big seizures. A ship like this carries

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far more than a caravan of camels." Almost as an afterthought he asked, "Might I ask what you're doing on board, sir?"

Rand introduced himself. "I'm retired from British Intelligence."

McNeil's eyes took on a new interest. "I doubt if you people ever retire."

Rand smiled slightly. "That's what my wife says all the time."

"I'll want to speak with you later."

He moved off with Claquer and Rand watched them take Sishane into one of the cabins for questioning. Rand could see it was going to be a long night, and he was right. It was nearly four in the morning before the search of the ship was completed. No drugs had been found.

Captain Rodríguez stood on the deck and lit a cigar. "I told you I was clean. You picked the wrong ship this time."

Sishane had reappeared and she told Rand, "I think my father is behind this somehow. They're taking me off the ship as soon as it's daylight."

"What for?"

"Further questioning. At least that's the term they used. I have to pack my things."

Rand suspected she was right about her father's involvement. Claquer would have reported on the ship's passengers, and Efes Kemal could have passed the word to keep her out of harm's way. Perhaps he hadn't trusted Rand to do the job.

"There were no drugs?" Rand asked the American, McNeil.

"Nothing. We opened every one of those crates in the hold. I suspected if we didn't find morphine base or cannabis we might discover a shipment of Russian weapons coming from Afghanistan. No such luck."

"Why are you taking Miss Kemal?"

"Her father is a high-ranking Turkish official," he said, as if that explained everything.

As dawn came up over the Mediterranean, the last of the searchers prepared to leave the *Happy Moon*. Sishane came out of her cabin, following Fandul, who was carrying her suitcase. Rand saw Gunther Sallis coming down the steps from the upper deck to intercept her. Out in the water, a small motor launch had pulled alongside to carry her to the waiting destroyer.

"Goodbye," she said, turning to the first mate to shake his hand. "I'm sorry—"

Sallis moved instantly. Before Rand fully realized what was happening he'd looped his arm around her throat and pulled her against

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him as a shield. His right hand held a razor-sharp knife against her throat. "All of you stand clear or she dies!" he warned. "We're taking that launch!"

Rand took a careful step forward, trying to block their path to the gangway. Sishane, looking terrified, was stumbling as Sallis pushed her forward. The captain and McNeil seemed frozen to their spots. It was Pierre Claquer who acted, almost without a second thought. He raised his Luger and put a bullet through the side of Sallis's head.

Efes Kemal had changed little over the years. A balding man in his fifties with a heavy black moustache, he still conveyed to Rand the appearance and demeanor of the quintessential diplomat. "How is your daughter?" Rand asked after they'd greeted one another at Kemal's office in Istanbul.

"As well as could be expected after her ordeal. I'm pleased you were there, old friend."

"I'm afraid I wasn't much help. Pierre Claquer, working with the American Drug Enforcement Administration, is the one who really saved Sishane's life."

"And I'm grateful for it. What's that you have there?"

Rand lifted the leather pouch he carried and placed it on Kemal's desk. "This, I fear, was the cause of it all."

Kemal unzipped the pouch and stared at the dozen bottles of vitamin pills. "I don't understand."

"You told me your daughter was in trouble with drugs and I leaped to the wrong conclusion—that she was taking or dealing in illegal narcotics. The drugs you referred to were pharmaceuticals. I finally realized that when she told me she met Gunther Sallis, the ship's first mate, while visiting a pharmaceutical house in India. It was then that he suggested she return here on board the *Happy Moon*. She'd heard you mention the ship, probably in connection with suspected narcotics trafficking, and it seemed like a good idea to her. She thought it would be easier to get through customs than on a plane, where searches can sometimes be very thorough."

Kemal tapped one of the bottles with his pencil. "What do these contain?"

"I asked myself that, too. It had to be something that would drive Sallis to kill two men—I'll get to that in a moment—and threaten your daughter's life as well. Then I remembered the captain telling me that Sallis was in the early stages of AIDS. There are a number of medications being developed around the world to combat this scourge,

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though they haven't yet been approved for use in America or most European countries. Sallis went to the Indian pharmaceutical house to obtain a supply of a new drug for himself, but Sishane got there first. Your daughter is an enterprising young woman. Somehow she obtained these pills, disguised as vitamins, and was transporting them for sale abroad. Each of these dozen bottles contains more than two hundred pills—some twenty-five hundred in all. I'm told there are AIDS sufferers in America and Europe who would pay two hundred dollars apiece for these pills, to be taken once a day. Perhaps even two hundred pounds apiece. You're looking at a half-million dollars or more right here in this pouch."

Efes Kemal nodded sadly. "A black market in AIDS medication. That's what my daughter was involved in."

"I'm afraid so. Sallis knew she'd gotten the medication he needed, and he was searching her cabin when Multan came in and caught him in the act. Sallis cut his throat, and then changed the blanket and sheets to dispose of the bloodstained ones. He carried the body to the empty cabin in hopes of delaying its discovery. All of this, the changed sheets, the transported body, pointed to a crew member rather than Sishane or Claquer."

"Can you be so certain the sheets were changed after the murder?"

Rand nodded. "There was blood soaked into the mattress but the sheets were clean. Your daughter didn't notice it till morning. Sallis was in charge of such things on board. He'd have known where to find new sheets and a blanket."

"You told me on the telephone that another man was killed back in Karachi."

"He'd just told me that Sishane was sailing on the *Happy Moon*. The wound in his throat was so similar that I'm certain Sallis was in the crowded café too. When he heard her name mentioned he walked by the table and slashed this man Grantor. Perhaps he feared Grantor could tell about the pills as well."

Efes Kemal nodded and stood up. "Old friend, thank you. This will be a secret between us. Let the police have their own theories for Sallis's actions and his assault upon my daughter. I will speak to her."

Rand reached out for the pouch but Kemal waved him away. "I will handle these."

They shook hands one more time and Rand departed from the office. He would catch a plane back to England that evening. Thinking about it all on the way to the airport, he had only one regret. He may have made a mistake when he left that half-million dollars' worth of pills sitting on his old friend's desk. ●

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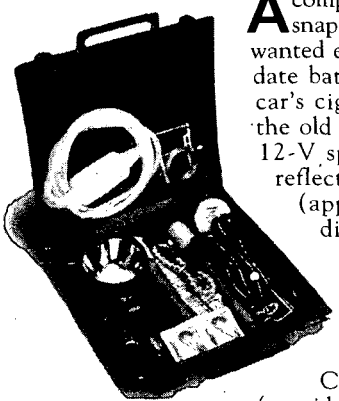

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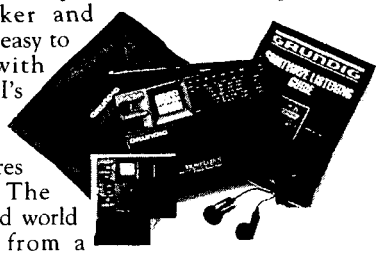

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

Trying to define a mystery subcategory can be tricky. For example, Mary Higgins Clark's introduction to *Malice Domestic 2: An Anthology of Original Traditional Mystery Stories* (Pocket, $4.99) quotes Mary Morman, a knowledgeable fan and founder of the Malice Domestic mystery convention held annually in the Washington, D.C. area, as follows: "The root of the word 'domestic' is the Latin *domos*, meaning 'home' or 'house.' Books and stories that fit the Malice Domestic genre involve the protagonist not in a professional capacity but through home relationships. They involve sisters, brothers, friends, and lovers. In addition to home relationships, Malice Domestic often breaches the sanctuary of the home itself. Bodies in the bathtub, corpses on the hearthrug . . ." (pages ix-x).

My suspicion that Morman's definition is a bit too narrow was borne out with the first story in the collection, Amanda Cross's "Who Shot Bryon Boyd?", a case for English professor Kate Fansler that doesn't fit under the definition at all, involving a crime not in the home and professionally motivated. The Cross story is far from the high standard of her novels, a weak volley in detective fiction's wearying gender wars. But after that, things begin to look up.

Several other series characters, all of whom coincidentally operate in historical periods, are in better form than Fansler. K. K. Beck's twenties flapper Iris Cooper appears in "A Romance in the Rockies," which is marginally MD if you consider Iris only at home when travelling. Ed Gorman's 1890s Cedar Rapids policewoman Anna Tolan encounters murder among members of a charismatic sect in "Anna and the Snake People," while Carole Nelson Douglas's Doyle spinoff Irene Adler is in especially good form in the pointedly feminist 1886 case "Parris Green," brought her way by an entertainingly presented Oscar Wilde. The latter two involve domestic situations, though in each the detective is called in rather than directly involved.

The collection's non-series tales are more apt to fit the MD definition, including "Cold and Deep," a chilling tale of a family Christmas by Frances Fyfield; "Dog Television," domestic crime from a canine viewpoint by Robert Barnard; and ". . . That Married Dear Old Dad," a fresh variant on a venerable crime-story situation by Margaret Maron. Also interesting, but not MD, are "The Return of Ma Barker," a police procedural by Gary Alexander, and a very much off-the-wall new metaphor of

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death, Susan Dunlap's "Checkout." The Cross and Dunlap stories illustrate the downside and the upside of original anthologies: the former a big-name writer with an inferior piece of work, the latter another big name with a highly experimental story that might not otherwise have found a ready market.

Illustrating the merits of the reprint anthology, which can draw proven material from an extended time period, is *Swindlers & Grifters* (Carroll & Graf, $18.95), the latest compilation from the backfiles of *EQMM* and *AHMM,* edited by Cynthia Manson. Leading off in a darkly humorous vein is a 1957 tale, one of Jim Thompson's two short stories about inept but despicable conman Mitch Allison, "The Frightening Frammis." Francis M. Nevins, Jr.'s more likable Milo Turner appears in "The Western Film Scam," a well-plotted 1980 story that combines old movie lore with a variation on the Queenian dying message. Congame stories are especially well suited to the twist-in-the-tail O. Henry surprise, as illustrated in Robert L. Fish's "One of the Oldest Con Games" (1977) and Donald E. Westlake's "Just the Lady We're Looking For" (1964). Also present in strong form are such writers as Julian Symons, Al Nussbaum, and William Campbell Gault. The high quality holds up in the last and newest story in the book, Jacklyn Butler's "The Messenger" (1992), which describes an unusual scam that is arguably more humane than most.

**** Susan Dunlap: *Time Expired,* $18.95. The latest in the reliable series about Berkeley policewoman Jill Smith delivers an especially fine combination of quirky characters, complex plot, and strong sense of place. After the suspenseful hostage negotiation sequence of the opening chapters has played itself out, other problems remain (or emerge) for Smith and her colleagues. Who is behind the series of generally applauded pranks directed at the city's meter maids, who come in both genders? And why is a terminally ill local attorney, whose support of radical clients has made her the object of a police dart-board, murdered in a nursing home? Dunlap is one of the best active proponents of the classical-style police procedural.

*** Parnell Hall: *Actor,* Mysterious, $18.95. New York private eye Stanley Hastings gets an unexpected chance to return to his theatrical roots when asked by an old friend to play the star role in Shaw's *Arms and the Man,* filling in with two days' notice for an actor who has died. (The back jacket shows author Hall in a 1968 performance of the same role, Captain Bluntschli.) If you enjoy the backstage backgrounds of writers like Ngaio Marsh and Simon Brett, and if the prospect of an unashamedly old-fashioned whodunit with no apparent concern beyond reader pleasure is attractive, this is your book. The outrageously theatrical confront-the-murderer scene may be unique in detective fiction, though it has an acknowledged

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cinematic precedent.

*** Aaron Elkins: *Old Scores,* Scribner's, $20. In his third adventure, Chris Norgren, the Seattle Art Museum's curator of Renaissance and Baroque Art, travels to France to check out the offered gift of a Rembrandt—with some odd strings attached by a donor with a penchant for elaborate jokes on the art world. This is an extremely enjoyable book with vivid characters, an amply-clued puzzle, and much fascinating background information. Norgren is low-key and likable, very similar to the author's better-known Gideon Oliver. He tells his own story, where Oliver appears in third person, and I thought the book had slightly fewer eating scenes than a typical Oliver adventure—until Elkins managed to describe two meals on one page late in the going.

*** Joseph Hansen: *Bohannon's Country,* Viking, $19. Hansen's rancher and sometime private eye Hack Bohannon, a strong second string to the author's better-known Dave Brandstetter, appears in three of the five stories here, and they are crisply efficient mystery novels in miniature. But the two tales in which Bohannon does not appear are the prizes of the collection. "Molly's Aim" (originally published in *EQMM)* does a remarkable job of getting inside the head of its young, female protagonist, and "McIntyre's Donald," which involves some of Hack's supporting cast but not the man himself, is one of those stories that keeps the reader guessing whether its events are supernatural, psychological, or something else.

Bantam continues its reprinting of Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe saga with a cleverly matched pair at $4.99 each: *The Mother Hunt* (1963), introduced by Marilyn Wallace, and *The Father Hunt* (1968), introduced by Donald E. Westlake. The two stories are good ones; the celebrity intros make some provocative points (Wallace credits Stout, via Archie Goodwin, with a pioneering understanding of "gender differences in communication styles"; Westlake finds Wolfe unlikable and not "that clever a detective"); and the material in the "World of Rex Stout" appendices, reproduced correspondence between the author and his publishers, is more interesting than that the old book covers and magazine illustrations offered in some of the books in the series.

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South Carolina poet laureate Bennie Lee Sinclair has had a number of stories published in small-press magazines and is a recipient of a Best American Short Stories citation. Her 1991 novel The Lynching *(Walker Books) marked her debut in the crime field, but this is her first piece for* EQMM.

GROUNDHOG

by BENNIE LEE SINCLAIR

"Here comes Sally with a snicker and a grin,
Groundhog grease all over her chin—Groundhog!"

—Southern Appalachian folk song

Pumpkin Creek cut across the bottom fields in a straight line but went underground several times for stretches of a dozen yards or so. There was a place where farm equipment was able to safely pass over these underground channels, a clearly marked crossing, making it even more puzzling how the boys' truck came to rest upside down in the creek. Even then, it might not have been a disaster if they hadn't been drunk and going so fast, night-hunting and joyriding over the rough turf.

It was the preacher's grown but slow son Ladson who found them. When he looked down from the parsonage window about daylight, there stood the red truck with its wheels in the air, and he at least knew enough to know it was wrong, and woke his mother. Soon there were a half-dozen men standing knee-deep in creek water straining to see through the shattered cab windows the dead boys, Johnny Bledsoe and his little brother Tommy, and redheaded Billy Hatcher, who was still alive, but they didn't know it yet.

Billy Hatcher was still living because of the buffer the steering wheel made, but though that was certainly lucky, it made him guilty, too, of driving too fast and trespassing drunk where he

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shouldn't have been, and in Roy Ashton's truck, which he hadn't even bothered to borrow.

The Bledsoe boys' parents vowed never to forgive Billy Hatcher, and as bad feeling spread, families and friends were split apart taking sides, those who thought Billy ought to go to jail, and those who thought he was too young to be responsible. It depended on how you viewed sixteen.

I didn't know all this at first, when I bought the bottom fields and moved into Pumpkin Valley—only that there was division and I would be expected to take sides eventually. I was newly widowed, and wanted only to find peace and hope. It was in all innocence that I let Billy Hatcher, by then eighteen, come to work for me—and Betty Bledsoe, the dead boys' mother, drive for me. I knew she had suffered a tragedy, but I didn't know what, and I knew Billy Hatcher wasn't well liked, but I didn't know why. I sensed there was something explosive waiting to happen in our valley, but I certainly didn't expect to fuel it.

The trouble began because I was fond of the groundhogs and I didn't want anybody to kill them. It pained me to see them in the roadside stands, stuffed as souvenirs, wearing doll sunglasses and little baseball caps. I figured we farmers planted enough to share a little, and now that I owned the bottoms I kept a gate up to keep people out. But boys still slipped down there to shoot at the groundhogs—often just for target practice. Nobody seemed to eat the meat anymore. I resented the killing and determined to put a stop to it. But with the first No Hunting sign I made enemies. Some of my neighbors grew silent, and some of the mothers came at me like bantam hens protecting the rights of their dibs. "My Kenny's been hunting down there all his life," they'd say, or, "My Chad don't bother nobody by huntin' down there."

"It bothers *me,*" I'd say, "and it certainly bothers the groundhogs!"

Betty Bledsoe, surprisingly, took my side, taking up the cause of the groundhogs. "I hate to hear all the shooting and noise down there," she confided. "That place ought to be left in peace." This she said while driving me to church, prim in her habitual colors, red, white, and blue.

Granny Endower, our guest in the backseat, observed, slowly and meaningfully, "Groundhogs ain't got souls. What does it matter?"

"God instructed Noah to take the animals into his care," I countered. "That's what I'm doing."

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On the way home, once Granny Endower had been let out, Betty Bledsoe, between slow tears, told me about her boys.

So when Billy Hatcher came to me later that week asking permission to go nights to the bottom fields—he didn't want to hunt, he said, he just wanted to sit and think and listen to the night sounds—I acquiesced. I thought I understood. It was the place of his guilt, and he needed to come to terms with it. "Of course," I said, with empathy.

Now and then I heard a blast or a blam and figured the groundhogs' ranks were being depleted by some quick trespasser, but not often. It was frustrating knowing I couldn't get down there quickly enough to catch anyone, living up the mountain above the parsonage as I did, and I could no longer depend on Ladson to keep an eye out, he having been sent away to an institution. But most of the boys seemed to stay away, and whenever I passed the field two or three of the funny furry groundhogs always sat up from their foraging, like alert sentries. I heard an occasional rumor that someone was setting traps for them, but I had no proof.

Billy Hatcher with his red hair and special guilt was the only one I permitted to go down there, and, in a quiet moment, I told Betty Bledsoe about his request and my reasoning.

My comments seemed to make an impression. Betty was—or had been—a mother. Now she had no sons to fuss over. Billy, perhaps because he had so few friends, seemed to be maturing into a responsible if reticent young man. He looked, to me, like an angel ordained against his will, with his fiery red hair and his quick temper suppressed now by determined quiet words and attention to whatever he considered duty.

I'd heard he had never known much love in his upbringing, and I began to fantasize that he and Betty would between them form some shared bond from their tragedy. It would help assuage his guilt, and her now childless loneliness. And so I was pleased when Betty began coming by afternoons while Billy was still there. That first time she nodded at him, the merest of greetings, I felt my heart lift in a way it had not lifted for years. I almost felt I could believe in peace and hope again, in happy endings. When I saw Billy striking out across the bottoms in late summer, groundhogs making an occasional dark shadow on the stubble before him, and Betty, parked in her car at sunset, looking out and down at that place where her sons drew their last breaths, I felt overjoyed that I'd helped ease the terrible tension between them.

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Not many nights after, the explosion of a double-barreled shotgun woke me. It was the close of an Indian summer night, a faint rosy hue was beginning to lift the darkness, and only my thudding heart spoke of terror. Then *Blam! Blam!* the gun sounded again, too close. The bottoms? I covered my head with the pillow and must have dozed. I woke to a sound even more unfamiliar to our valley—that of a siren.

I got up, put on a warm robe and my glasses, and went out on the porch. I could see a flashing light below the parsonage. Then the EMS ambulance started up, returning to town—but slowly, without the siren. I watched it cross the gap. Another siren approached—the deputy's car? I thought about dressing, going down to the bottoms to see what had happened, but I knew that Granny Endower would call me soon enough with the news.

Until then, I went into the kitchen to make some coffee, and I was there when Betty Bledsoe knocked at the front door. I might not have recognized her, but for the familiar red, white, and blue she wore. She stood there, disheveled, a stranger in her swaying stance, with the gun and heavy towsack she carried. Blood dripped from it onto the porch floor that Billy had painted and kept so carefully clean for me.

"There's groundhogs in here!" Betty's eyes and face blazed. She must have run all the way from the bottoms carrying the heavy dripping sack, she was so winded and red. "Do you understand me?" she pleaded. *"Groundhogs!"*

I looked at her uncomprehendingly.

"That's all he was doing, all he was going to the bottoms for, all that time . . . trapping the groundhogs!"

"Who?" I asked weakly.

"Billy Hatcher! One of the traps was right there where the truck went in, where my boys . . . There was a groundhog caught, chewing its foot off, when along he comes, checking the traps, whistling . . . "

She handed me the sack. I staggered back from the weight, blood dripping now inside my clean house.

"The ambulance?" I asked dully.

"So I shot him. I killed him! What else could I do?" She threw up her hands wildly. "He was killing the groundhogs!"

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a ***NEW*** short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

This year the real president of the United States was honored by the Mystery Writers of America as its Reader of the Year. The revelation that Mr. Clinton loves a mystery must have brought him a lot of mail from aspiring writers. We hope none of them proves as persistent as the scriptwriter of Mr. Bankier's story . . .

A SCRIPT FOR THE PRESIDENT

by ***WILLIAM BANKIER***

Royal Flagg woke up thinking he was back in Smokey Valley. He thought he heard somebody tuning his mother's piano. Eyes closed, he waited to hear her voice calling from the foot of the stairs: "Roy? You'll be late for school!"

The garbage truck in the laneway off Hollywood Boulevard stopped backing up so the repetitive note he had mistaken for a piano came to an end. Connie Seltzer rolled over beside him and made wet noises with her mouth. He was not going to miss school, he was going to be late for the early shift at the restaurant.

"I am your waiter, Royal," he rumbled close to her ear, speaking through a filter of her ash-blond hair. "The special this morning is a nibble on the neck."

Connie squeaked as she stretched and turned to intrude her tiny self into the cage of his lanky arms and legs. "I don't believe you!" she murmured.

Nobody did. They all thought he was just another southern boy lost in L.A.; one more aspiring actor/writer waiting tables while dreaming of discovery, fame, and fortune. Few people realized that Royal Flagg had friends in high places. He was not a rose born to blush unseen. Soon, very soon, he was going to light up the sky.

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* * *

"Don't do it, Roy." Connie was driving the car in dressing gown and bare feet. This habit was so Californian, Roy could only tolerate it by writing it into his script. The routine was for her to drop him at the restaurant on Melrose and head back to the apartment. There, she would take her time getting ready for her ten o'clock start at the radio station.

"Why not do it?" he said. "It's a golden opportunity."

"You'll be setting your mother up for a big rejection."

"I don't think so."

"You stopped sending her money. You don't even answer her letters."

"She'll come if I ask her."

Roy did not feel guilty about stopping the money. His mother was not the only one chasing him to pay. Anyway, all she did was use it for cat food and vet bills. It was crazy to have ten cats. Last time he flew to New Orleans and did the long drive in the rental car to Smokey Valley, the animals really spooked him. A few of them were normal. But others were ghost cats—old, sick strays that looked like cats made out of pipe cleaners. One orange character teetered on the lawn near the porch and stared at Roy as if he had materialized out of thin air.

Clara Hunter Flagg was a bleeding heart. Roy classified her this way even though he knew it was only a small part of the truth. He could not afford, not right now, to see her any other way. He needed all his concentration, and what little money he was earning, to push his career. His film script was ready. The fact that two agents had read *An Air That Kills* and declined to handle it meant nothing.

"Are you getting out of the car?" Connie said. "Or do you intend to sit here all morning?"

There was the restaurant door propped open. There was the ditzy sequined sign, Scrump. Behind the big window sat menacing silhouettes, customers who would want their toast taken back because it was not supposed to be buttered. And the ketchup bottle was empty. And always, always, more coffee. When he first arrived in L.A. and was a customer himself, Roy had enjoyed coming to Scrump. In those bragging, swaggering days, he met Connie Seltzer here. He got himself a fine place to live, rent-free.

"Will you talk to Chatterton?" Roy was balanced on the Melrose Avenue pavement now, high-top training shoes rocking just a trifle, bending his frame to show Connie his worried expression.

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"Can't you put your mother up in a Best Western?"

"She won't come if it's a hotel. We have no room. Hal has that giant condo."

"All right, I'll ask him." Connie let the car creep forward. "But you know Hal Chatterton. Don't be surprised if he says no."

The headphones mashed Chatterton's fuzzy brown hair on both sides. Connie had said once that he looked like a Brillo sandwich. L.A.'s popular talk-show host liked that one. He used it a few times on the air.

"In the next half-hour," he said into the microphone, "we have Dirty Berty on the line from London to dish the dirt about the royals. And my aggressive co-host, Connie Seltzer, will review the movie *Acid Heart*. Did you actually see this one, Connie?"

"Start to finish. Paid my money and hung in to the end."

"Not a rave, I take it?"

"Not unless you like women in cages."

"Save it till after the break. This is Hal 'Chatty' Chatterton on 109, KLDD."

As the commercial sequence began, Chatterton lowered the volume on the studio speaker. "Give it to me again," he said to Connie. "His mother?"

"I met her once in New Orleans when Roy and I first started going together. He drove alone to Smokey Valley and got her and brought her to the hotel. He didn't want me to see where he used to live."

"Smokey Valley." Chatterton shook his head slowly and half closed his eyes, as if he had just heard of the existence of a lost city.

"She's a cheerful old biddy. Taught school all her life. The residents of the town worship her, they all sat in her class. Including you know who."

"He really knows Mike Linford?"

"I don't think they ever exchanged words. Linford is somewhat older. But Roy saw him around, he used to come to his house." It was exciting, talking with such familiarity about the new president of the United States. "Mike Linford used to come over to the Flagg residence for piano lessons."

"I have to admit it, I'm impressed. All this time I've considered your friend to be a Louisiana con artist. Sammy Glick with Spanish moss," Chatterton said, referring to Schulberg's famous antihero. "Now I have to concede he's a con artist who knows the president."

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"Royal Flagg is just a name to Linford." Connie hurried as the commercials rolled through. "But Clara Hunter Flagg would be an important person from the president's past. We've all seen what an approachable character Linford is. If his old piano teacher were to show up, he'd see her."

"And I'm to house the widow Flagg for how long? A weekend?" The producer in the control room had her finger raised, one eye on the clock. "What does she take on her bran flakes?" Chatterton said, preparing his mind for Dirty Berty from London.

Royal Flagg was hovering by the cashier's end of the counter, doing what he liked best. He was counting his tips. He pressed a sheaf of ones on Frederico and waited for big bills in exchange. Frederico was from Guatemala. When Roy came aboard, Freddy was a busboy. Now he wore a burgundy cummerbund and a black moustache.

"You must be about ready to buy your house," he said as he handed the waiter his money.

"Got to fly my mother in from New Orleans. She's coming next weekend."

"That's nice." Frederico's mother would never come to L.A. She was in a common grave near their village along with a dozen other women and children.

Roy emptied his eyes and showed the cashier a limpid smile. For his own amusement, because he was certain Freddy had never seen the movie *Psycho,* he used a Norman Bates voice as he said, "A boy's best friend is his mother."

Frederico tapped the wall calendar. "Linford will be in town. Your mother can see the president."

"I'm working on it," Roy said. He stuffed his wallet down into a front pocket of his jeans and left the restaurant. Connie was waiting in the car three meters along the street. Roy fought off an urge to kick in one of the doors. She had finished the show and then had driven all the way from the studio on Cahuenga. She would chauffeur him to the apartment and then head back to the studio to prepare tomorrow's program. Roy felt like a school kid. Once in a while she missed and he took a cab. And then only after a delicious wander, looking at people and at himself in windows.

She reached across the seat to open his door. "Okay shift?"

"So-so. Do a good show?"

"Like the curate's egg," she said. "Good in parts."

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Connie had lots of these literary-type things to say. Roy disliked them. "Talk to Chatterton?"

"Not yet." She had predicted Hal would not agree to put up Roy's mother. It bothered her to admit she had been wrong about that. "I'll try this afternoon."

They wheeled into traffic. One good thing about his prisoner-status in Connie's car; she was a conscientious driver, she tended to shut up. This left Roy free to think about his script. Whenever he was feeling down, a few minutes dreaming about *An Air That Kills* would lift him into a state of euphoria.

The movie would open with footage shot from a helicopter. The camera is racing at low level across a wooded area, a blur of dark branches. Now we see open pasture with two horses galloping flat out. The horses are terrified, of course, because the chopper is making a ferocious noise. But the viewers don't think of that. They're just watching those elegant stallions running, shoulder to shoulder.

Then the camera lifts and we see the village, the house with the green roof. And we see the boy standing in the open gateway, not waving as a pickup truck raises dust on its way to the paved road.

"You'll be all right now?" They were in front of the apartment building. She always asked him if he'd be all right.

"Soon as I get the booze and the marijuana. And telephone the gang to come on over." She drove away, leaving him with a glimpse of her tolerant smile. Roy went inside. He was going to use the telephone, not for anything as sterile as partying. He was going to put a call through to Ellis and Fanny Temple. It was one thing to leave everything to his mother. But what if she could not get through to the president on the day? It would be prudent to prepare the ground.

"This is Royal Flagg speaking. I'd like to talk to Ellis Temple. It's in connection with the president's visit next weekend?" He had opened a new barrel of Southern Courtesy and was letting the sweet stuff flow. Asked to wait, he passed the time making faces at himself in the mirror beside Connie's desk.

A mature female voice came on the line, courteous but brisk. This one could crown him king or send him away with a flea in his ear. "How may I help you?"

"By making available a few minutes of our president's precious time. Let me explain. I am Royal Flagg. I am the son of Clara Hunter Flagg from Smokey Valley, Louisiana."

"Keep talking, Mr. Flagg. You mesmerize."

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"When Mike Linford was a boy, he took piano lessons from my mother. Came over to the house every Thursday afternoon."

"Stop right there, Royal Flagg. You don't have to say any more. Where is your mother right now?"

"In Smokey Valley. But she has a ticket to fly."

"Then fly your mother in, by all means. This sounds like a most serendipitous meeting. Make it the second day, the Sunday afternoon. We can fit Mrs. Flagg in for tea."

Roy's heart was racing. "And who am I talking to?"

"This is Fanny Temple speaking. I'll be having you checked out, of course. If all is well, you won't hear from me. Just come along on Sunday." Her voice went up a notch. "Your mother won't mind a few photographs, will she?"

After arrangements were made and he put the telephone down, Roy had to run from room to room, bouncing off furniture. He ended up in the kitchen, where he took a beer from the refrigerator, popped the lid, and sat at the table.

Here was something to tell his father. Ted Flagg had been so good, it was hard to think about him. But once in a while, Roy could stand to remember. He was ten years old and his mother brought him to New Orleans. On a warm afternoon, they stood in the open doorway of Crazy Annie's on Bourbon Street, listening to the jazz. The music made little Roy feel like marching. His father looked fine back there on the low stage in his white jacket with the black shirt collar open. Then the leader spoke into a microphone. "Here's something special from Ted Flagg." Roy would never forget the cathedral hush as his father moved front and center and raised the glittering trombone. He played a lilting, weeping melody that Roy now knew was "September Song."

When Ted Flagg joined the Stan Kenton Orchestra, it was big news in Smokey Valley. So was the bulletin a year later from Montreal where the band was on tour. The visiting jazzman had closed Champ's Shoebar on Crescent Street after the band's two shows that day at the Seville Theater. There was an argument over a woman. Ted Flagg ended up on the pavement, bleeding to death from a knife wound to the abdomen.

At the time, Roy was in Memphis with a rock band called Stella in honor of Stanley Kowalski's poignant cry in *Streetcar*. After he read the telegram, Roy told his buddies he was not going on. And he never did again. There was a photograph in his wallet of four

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leather-clad high-school kids frowning at the camera from around a pool table . . . all that was left of the band.

Now, past failures and former hesitations were over and forgotten. The future shone clear. His mother would fly in, he would take her to the Temple estate near Santa Barbara. She would shake hands with Mike Linford, as would Royal Flagg himself, without a doubt. And there would be a moment, he would create the moment, when he would tell the president about his script.

Roy was asleep on the sofa when Connie let herself into the apartment. The place was dark. She switched on the overhead. "Shoes off," was her greeting. Her mind was still boiling from what she had been told an hour ago. The old man bought her coffee in the diner across the street from the studio. She saw his credentials, she believed he was telling the truth.

Roy scuffed the bulky trainers off one at a time and let them hit the floor with an infuriating pause between drops. "Guess who I was just talking to."

"Elvis? John Lennon?"

"Fanny Temple. She's agreed to have my mother see Linford. On the Sunday. She loves the idea."

Connie stared at Roy for a few moments. She played back his tone of voice. This was straight stuff. "Your mother will be thrilled."

"Better yet. I'll get to show him my script."

"Big mistake."

"What did you think this is about? I'm not going to all this trouble and expense just so Mike Linford and Clara Hunter Flagg can reminisce."

"I don't like it."

"You don't like anything I do."

"You're going to take it over. The Temples, your mother, the president—they're all expecting to remember old times. And there you'll be, promoting your stupid script. Nobody wants that."

"Nobody!" Roy's bellow shook the windows. Connie shrank back as he rose from the couch. "Nobody has ever cared a damn about my screenplay. I'm the only one. Maybe they'll laugh me off the estate. Maybe they'll have me arrested." The face he hung close to hers was a caricature of Royal Flagg. She was reminded of a cat's face when you take it by the scruff and draw back the skin. His eyes were slits, the nose flattened. "But this is my chance and I'm not letting it go by."

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The apartment was like a library for the next three hours. Connie made herself a sandwich and ate in the kitchen, turning the pages of a magazine. The old man's disclosure about Roy meant things were going to change. He would probably take off. There were times when she despised men.

Roy sat inside the headphones staring at a basketball game on television. The game ended and he switched off. After ten minutes watching the blank screen, he heaved himself up and went looking for Connie. She was in bed now, face to the wall.

"I'll need the car on Sunday. To take Mother to Santa Barbara."

"I can't let you have it."

"This is important."

"Rent one."

"I haven't the money to rent a car. You know that."

"Then get a better job."

He stood for a full minute, watching her, while the light through the window changed. "You want me to vanish?"

"What else is new?"

He was not always sure what she was talking about. "I'll think about it."

This was no time to pack and leave. But if the Sunday encounter worked out, then everything would change. Roy went to Connie's desk, opened a lower drawer, and took out his script. He switched on the angle-poise lamp and sat down inside its glow. Then, slowly, he read *An Air That Kills* from start to finish, turning each page the way the minister used to do with the giant Bible on the lectern back when Roy was a choirboy. Two services every Sunday.

Clara Hunter Flagg came through the arrival gate with a young man carrying her hand luggage. He was some sort of business executive, the jacket of his expensive suit draped over his arm. Roy watched from the crowd gathered to meet the flight, saw the way his mother was charming this man, and felt one down. The guy was not doing a good deed for an old lady. He was enjoying her company.

Roy came forward and there were first-name introductions and one of those salesman handshakes. He was glad when the guy peeled off to join his wife. She was a neat little creature who liked to sit with her legs crossed. Roy had been inspecting her for the past half-hour.

"This way, Mother. Your luggage is through here. Then we go and board the shuttle."

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"Where is the car, Royal?" She looked smart in her pale blue suit. Her hair was very short and brushed forward, a stylish silver crown.

"It's in the garage for a new transmission." He was not about to admit that Connie had cut him off. Or even that he went about in somebody else's car.

"But how will we get to Santa Barbara tomorrow? How will I keep my date with the president?"

He acknowledged her whimsy by putting an arm around her shoulder and dragging her against him so they walked off balance for a couple of steps. "You'll be staying at Hal Chatterton's place. Hal's going to lend me his car."

An hour later, they were at Chatterton's building. Roy had visualized the famous radio personality watching for their arrival, coming outside to lay on the greeting. But it was nothing like that. As Roy bullied the matching suitcases through the lobby door, a guard behind a desk studied him intently.

On the fifth floor, Chatterton made jocular noises letting them in. But it was hollow. He was doing a number. He seemed to think he would get dirty if he stood too close to Roy Flagg. Perhaps he had been listening to Connie's negative perceptions. He led them to the guest room, but within minutes he excused himself and left the apartment, having given Clara a key to the front door.

"Your friend is a strange man," she said. "All that hair."

"I hardly ever see him. He's Connie's friend."

It was much better with Connie. She got on with Clara Hunter Flagg from the first moment. The ladies sat together in the backseat, with Roy given permission to drive the car. He took them on a tour of Beverly Hills, then swept around to the Chinese Theater on Hollywood Boulevard so that Clara could fit her tiny shoes into the concrete footprints of the stars.

Finally, they got onto Sunset Boulevard and drove west as far as they could go, racing at last down the winding hillside road to the ocean. Here, they dined at a beachfront restaurant with gulls hovering outside their window.

Connie took the wheel on the return journey. Roy ran his mother inside when they got to Chatterton's building. Hal was home but unapproachable, the back of his head showing over the top of a tall swivel chair. He was facing a blue screen, rattling the keys on his computer.

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"It's all right," Clara whispered in the hallway. "I'm tired, I'd like to rest. Thank you for a lovely day and an excellent dinner."

He kissed his mother good night, crept out of the apartment, and hurried back to Connie. She said, as soon as the car was rolling, "Will you be abandoning me, too, once you strike it rich?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The way you make use of people. As if they were rungs on a ladder."

He waited one full traffic light, red to green. As they moved off, he spoke the words he had decided might cool her out. It was worth a try. "You want to get married?"

"Don't make me laugh."

"Isn't that what this is about?"

"Your wife and daughter would hate it if you married me."

Speeding cars are great places for domestic fights. Nobody can leave the room and slam the door. "I never told you about them because it would serve no purpose."

"Perfect," she said to herself.

"When did you find out?"

"This afternoon. A nice old man came to the station. I thought private detectives look like Humphrey Bogart. Your wife is trying to find you. And now she has. He said you can run but you can't hide. He thinks you should straighten up and fly right."

"I'm too old to change."

"She needs money, Roy. To feed and clothe and educate your daughter."

"I don't have any money," he whined. "I can't even buy a new pair of shoes."

"Because you're drifting and dreaming, pretending you're going to sprout wings and turn into Tennessee Williams." Connie's anger was diminishing, she was gliding into persuasion. "You should get yourself into a job with a future. You're a bright guy, you could earn money. This script thing is never going to happen."

She could not hurt him now by putting down his script. He was too close. This time tomorrow, he would have had his conference with Mike Linford. "I'm curious. What did the detective tell you about Sharon?"

"That she hired him to trace you. That he's sure we're both nice people. And now that I'm informed, I'll persuade you to do the right thing."

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"No problem. Linford will listen to me tomorrow. He'll talk to Ellis Temple. Temple will option *An Air That Kills.* It's not impossible, they pick up hundreds of scripts every year. I'll get money up front and everybody will get paid."

Connie adopted a studious tone of voice. "There's a wife and child back in Louisiana. What other secrets am I unaware of?"

"Cut it out."

"Sharon is a nice name. Mrs. Sharon Flagg. What's your daughter's name?"

Roy drew a blank. He had to reach around in the dark at the back of his mind. Finally he was able to say, "Jennifer."

On Sunday, Roy was too proud to ask Connie if she would change her mind about the car. He showered and shaved and put some mousse on his hair. He dragged out his three-piece dark blue suit from the end of the closet and drew off the plastic garbage bag that served as a dust cover. He was stunned to discover a moth hole on one side of the vest, near a button. He thought about leaving the vest off, but he had always believed he looked substantial with it on. If he got close to anybody, he could button the jacket and the hole would be concealed.

A coat of polish had brought his old leather shoes back to life. Roy did some mirror time; his grin and the white shirt were dynamite together.

Connie always slept interminably on a Sunday. The taxi pulled up outside, he found his wallet, and pocketed some change. As he opened the front door, he heard her voice from the bedroom. "Roy?" But he closed the door and kept on going without a word.

At Chatterton's place, his mother let him in. She was dressed in a white linen suit and a pink pillbox hat. She looked crisp and ready for anything. Roy drew confidence from her. The Flagg family was about to whip the world. "All set to take on that Linford kid?" he asked.

"Can't wait."

He went looking for mein host. Hal Chatterton was in the kitchen, talking on a cellular telephone while coffee seeped through a filter. He said something and put down the phone.

"How's Connie?" Roy took a chance on saying. "She was asleep when I left."

"She's asked me to do the impossible. Turn back time so that when you show up in her life, she can walk the other way."

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"I don't have any quarrel with you, Hal." He wanted to borrow the man's car.

"How does it happen? Connie Seltzer shows me more stuff in a day than you could in a year. But she's working for wages on a radio show, while you're off to see the wizard."

"Don't put down the program, Hal. You're the best on the coast."

"Need some money? Is that what this is?"

"No, thanks. But I need your car. Just for the afternoon."

"Can't do it."

"I'll get it washed afterwards. Fill the tank."

"I have to be in Laguna this afternoon. I need my car."

Roy began to heat up. The unaccustomed shirt collar squeezed his neck. "Think about it, Hal. This is once in a lifetime."

"Your lifetime, not mine."

There was a long knife on the butcher-block table. Roy got himself out of that room. But he came back from the dark hallway and thrust his face into the light to say, "It's my mother's lifetime, too. And one other thing. You ask why I'm succeeding more than Connie? You're such a homogenized bastard, you wouldn't remember. The cream, Mr. Chatterton, always rises to the top."

Roy plunged on down the hall. The situation was desperate. They could not make it to the Temple estate by bus or train, even if there had been time. And there was no time. They needed wheels. Roy passed an open doorway, saw bedclothes tossed back, a dresser with a lamp casting light over a litter of objects. He saw a wallet, some loose change, a handkerchief, a roll of mints. None of it mattered, but the ring of keys did.

There was nothing to think about, no time to think. He strode to the dresser, picked up the keys. A red tag had the letters BMW in gold. These were the keys to Hal Chatterton's shiny black car.

Roy pocketed the keys and hurried to where his mother was waiting. She was seated on the lip of a chair with her knees together and her hands folded over a beaded purse. God grant me, Roy said to himself, some of the courage that sees this lady through hard times.

"Let's hit the road," he said cheerfully, picking up his script in its crisp new covers. "Hal is lending us his car."

They went past Ventura, getting close to Santa Barbara, when Roy spotted the highway patrol cruiser in his rearview mirror. It tailed him for a mile or so while his stomach turned over. Hal could very

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well have reported the car as stolen. The cops would be verifying the license number on their computer.

"Why are we speeding up, Roy?"

"There's a police car following me."

"Shouldn't you be slowing down?"

If they stopped him, it was all over. His intention had been to borrow the car and return it safely. But if Chatterton said stolen, that's what it was. And the man had clout; half of Los Angeles listened to his dorky program. No cops would buy his story that he had to see the president. Why? To show him a movie script? He could picture some raw-boned officer with a gun strapped to his leg taking the script from him and reading the title. *"An Air That Kills?* Going to see the president with this, sir? Any weapons in the car? Get out slowly with your hands in sight. Lie face down on the pavement."

The lights on the cruiser roof came on and the siren went Woop! as the police drew closer. Roy put his foot to the floor. The expensive car accelerated through the sixties, seventies, eighties. Chatterton's vehicle handled as smoothly at ninety-five as it did at forty miles slower. They began overtaking and passing cars. His mother stared at him. "Are you in some kind of trouble, Roy Flagg? What have you done?"

"Open the glove compartment, Mother. Do it." She pressed the chrome button and the door dropped down. "Take out that folded sheet of paper. Read me what it says. I wrote down the directions how to get to the estate."

She read in a schoolteacher voice. "Two miles past The Grey Walrus beach bar. Turn right at big yellow house. Halfway up hill, guarded gate between eucalyptus trees."

"And there it is," Roy said. "The Grey Walrus." There were three California highway-patrol cars behind him now. Watching for his next landmark, he had to reduce speed. The dark-lensed, implacable faces staring through the windshield of the car behind drew closer, filling Roy with dread. A battered pickup loaded with mattresses was in the lane ahead of him. He cut hard right and raced past, narrowly missing a rattling, weaving big-rig in the other lane. Looking back, he saw a police car absorb a sideswipe from the big-rig.

The cops began spinning, clipping the pickup and sending it across the median into the path of southbound traffic. Roy heard smashes, saw cars rear-ending over there. But the worst thing was the CHP cruiser. It was rolling now, glass spraying, a wheel off and bouncing

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along the highway. The other police cars were doing things to avoid running into the debris. For the moment, the pursuit was over.

That was when Roy noticed the police helicopter overhead. At the same moment, he saw the big yellow house. It was a restaurant; that was its color and its name. He pulled into the parking lot behind the frame building. There was no time for anything. "Mother, I have to go!" He snatched up his script.

"Royal, what's going on?"

He saw her face, cold and hard with a threat of punishment in eyes made of glass. He could not stand looking at this face. "There's no time. Stay here, you'll be all right."

"The president is waiting to talk to me."

"I'll explain there was an accident. He'll understand."

Roy slammed the car door and darted into a stand of trees on the hillside. The chopper was holding position high above the parking lot. Cops would soon arrive in numbers. What would Clara Hunter Flagg tell them? Everything she knew. But people in authority always have to check things out. If he hurried, there would still be time.

Roy was panting when he reached the iron gates. He could see a white porch and a red tile roof through dark foliage down a gravel lane. Two uniformed guards came forward to meet him. Three men in suits lingered by the gate, jackets unbuttoned.

"I had a flat tire at the bottom of the hill." The self-deprecating grin was always there when he needed it. "I have an appointment. Royal Flagg."

The guard turned a page on his clipboard. "Supposed to be a lady as well. Clara Flagg?"

"My mother. She's not well, she couldn't come. I'll have to make her apologies."

They patted him down, then let him go on up to the house. Another man in a suit headed him off on the porch and patted him down again. A maid led him through to a spacious room with logs burning in a fireplace. An elderly man with a bald head was tucked into a chair near the fire. A tall, slender woman in shiny red lounging pajamas rose from a chair on the other side of the fire. Roy looked past her, because Mike Linford was stretched out on a sofa with his shoes off and two pillows propping up the big pink face with its cap of salt-and-pepper hair. All three had drinks; the president was holding his glass on his belt buckle.

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"You must be Roy Flagg. I'm Fanny Temple. That's my husband, Ellis, over there." She peered over Roy's shoulder into the doorway. "Where's your mother?"

"She was taken ill at the last minute. I'm sorry. I should have telephoned."

"Taken ill."

"I came ahead because I was afraid you'd tell me not to come. And I did so want to see the president."

"Is that a Louisiana accent I'm listening to?" Linford said. This was all the permission Roy needed. He was in.

"Better than that, sir. Smokey Valley."

The president got to his feet. It surprised Roy how big he was. Even in his socks, he towered over everybody else. They shook hands. "Royal Flagg, your mother is one fine piano teacher. Why, she almost taught me to play 'Beautiful Ohio.' "

Everybody laughed and Roy relaxed even more. But when Fanny Temple offered him a drink, he refused. It seemed good tactics. He was not a member of this party. He would make his pitch, and he would leave his script in the president's hands, and he would go.

The others resumed their seats. Roy remained standing. "I don't want to intrude on your quiet time, Mr. President, in such peaceful surroundings with these good people."

"Don't you just love it?" the president said.

"So I'll say my piece and take my leave. I've written a screenplay. I took the liberty of bringing it with me."

"Listen to this, Ellis. Wake up, he's making a pitch. Give the man a Kewpie doll."

"I want your permission to hand it to you, Mr. President. Because it's all about the town we both grew up in and the people who live there. And it comes from the heart."

Linford was sitting now, big woolly feet angled on the carpet. He took the script from Roy, balanced it on a knee, and opened the cover.

"All I ask is for you to read it. Then pass it on to whoever you think ought to see it." Roy glanced at Fanny Temple. She granted him a solemn wink.

There was a movement outside the room, voices rumbling in the vestibule. One of the suited men walked in, glancing at Roy as he said, "Mr. President?"

"What is it, Mel?"

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"There's been some trouble on the freeway south of here. A unit belonging to the highway patrol went over. There's an officer killed."

Fanny said, "God help us."

Mel went on, "The unit that crashed, and others, were in pursuit of a vehicle driven by this man here. The car was reported stolen."

"Are you sure of that?"

"We spoke to his mother, sir. She's waiting down the hill in the car. She told us they were coming here."

After a silence, Linford said, "This is very serious, Roy."

"I know it is, sir."

"You're going to have to go with Mel and answer for whatever you've done."

"I'm ready to do that," Royal Flagg said. "But can I ask you to read my script all the same?"

The president riffled the pages, ending back at page one. "I have a problem with the title. *An Air That Kills*. That's Housman, isn't it? 'A Shropshire Lad'?" Linford tipped his head as he began to recite:

> "Into my heart an air that kills
> From yon far country blows.
> What are those blue, remembered hills,
> What spires, what farms are those?"

"You know that poem, sir!"

"The line you chose for your title has a negative connotation. Could be talking about pollution, hydrocarbons. You'd be better off calling your play *Blue Remembered Hills.*" He handed back the script.

"That's a good idea. I'll change the title."

"And maybe you can work on the rest of it while you're at it. One more draft can't hurt."

Mel was staring at Roy. His eyes were hard, his face a mask. "Let's go," he said.

Leaving the room with Mel behind him, shoving him, Roy managed to turn and say, "Thank you, sir. You only glanced at my script and you've improved it a lot."

"That's why they elected me president," Linford said as agents in the vestibule seized Roy and roughly cuffed his hands behind his back, making his wrists bleed while they hurried him out of the house. ●

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The following ghost story by M. R. James was written specially for the library of a dolls' house built in honor of Britain's Queen Mary. Visitors to the Wembley Exhibition of 1924 would have seen the structure, which was designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, filled with pictures and furniture by leading artists and craftsmen of the day, but the house was not then, nor as far as we know, at any future time, peopled with the six-inch dolls for which it was designed. Ultimately, the house found its way to Windsor Castle where it remained at least up to the time of the 1992 fire, when it contained the castle's only working piece of fire equipment, a tiny fire engine designed by Lutyens. Unlike Queen Mary's Dolls' House, the miniature building of M. R. James's imagination is all too full of inhabitants. A Cambridge don, James was celebrated for his ghost stories, which he often read to friends on Christmas Eve at King's College . . .

THE HAUNTED DOLLS' HOUSE

by M. R. JAMES

"I suppose you get stuff of that kind through your hands pretty often?" said Mr. Dillet, as he pointed with his stick to an object which shall be described when the time comes: and when he said it, he lied in his throat, and knew that he lied. Not once in twenty years—perhaps not once in a lifetime—could Mr. Chittenden, skilled as he was in ferreting out the forgotten treasures of half a dozen counties, expect to handle such a specimen. It was collectors' palaver, and Mr. Chittenden recognized it as such.

"Stuff of that kind, Mr. Dillet! It's a museum piece, that is."

"Well, I suppose there are museums that'll take anything."

"I've seen one, not as good as that, years back," said Mr. Chittenden thoughtfully, "but that's not likely to come into the market: and I'm told they 'ave some fine ones of the period over the water. No, I'm only telling you the truth, Mr. Dillet, when I say that if you was to place an unlimited order with me for the very best that could be got—and you know I 'ave facilities for getting to know of such things, and a reputation to maintain—well, all I can say is, I should lead

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you straight up to that one and say, 'I can't do any better for you than that, sir.' "

"Hear, hear!" said Mr. Dillet, applauding ironically with the end of his stick on the floor of the shop. "How much are you sticking the innocent American buyer for it, eh?"

"Oh, I shan't be over hard on the buyer, American or otherwise. You see, it stands this way, Mr. Dillet—if I knew just a bit more about the pedigree—"

"Or just a bit less," Mr. Dillet put in.

"Ha, ha! You will have your joke, sir. No, but as I was saying, if I knew just a little more than what I do about the piece—though anyone can see for themselves it's a genuine thing, every last corner of it, and there's not been one of my men allowed to so much as touch it since it came into the shop—there'd be another figure in the price I'm asking."

"And what's that: five and twenty?"

"Multiply that by three and you've got it, sir. Seventy-five's my price."

"And fifty's mine," said Mr. Dillet.

The point of agreement was, of course, somewhere between the two, it does not matter exactly where—I think sixty guineas. But half an hour later the object was being packed, and within an hour Mr. Dillet had called for it in his car and driven away. Mr. Chittenden, holding the cheque in his hand, saw him off from the door with smiles, and returned, still smiling, into the parlour where his wife was making the tea. He stopped at the door.

"It's gone," he said.

"Thank God for that!" said Mrs. Chittenden, putting down the teapot. "Mr. Dillet, was it?"

"Yes, it was."

"Well, I'd sooner it was him than another."

"Oh, I don't know; he ain't a bad feller, my dear."

"Maybe not, but in my opinion he'd be none the worse for a bit of a shake-up."

"Well, if that's your opinion, it's my opinion he's put himself into the way of getting one. Anyhow, *we* shan't have no more of it, and that's something to be thankful for."

And so Mr. and Mrs. Chittenden sat down to tea.

And what of Mr. Dillet and of his new acquisition? What it was, the title of this story will have told you. What it was like, I shall have to indicate as well as I can.

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There was only just room enough for it in the car, and Mr. Dillet had to sit with the driver: he had also to go slow, for though the rooms of the dolls' house had all been stuffed carefully with soft cotton wool, jolting was to be avoided, in view of the immense number of small objects which thronged them; and the ten-mile drive was an anxious time for him, in spite of all the precautions he insisted upon. At last his front door was reached, and Collins, the butler, came out.

"Look here, Collins, you must help me with this thing—it's a delicate job. We must get it out upright, see? It's full of little things that mustn't be displaced more than we can help. Let's see, where shall we have it? (After a pause for consideration.) Really, I think I shall have to put it in my own room, to begin with at any rate. On the big table—that's it."

It was conveyed—with much talking—to Mr. Dillet's spacious room on the first floor, looking out on the drive. The sheeting was unwound from it, and the front thrown open, and for the next hour or two Mr. Dillet was fully occupied in extracting the padding and setting in order the contents of the rooms.

When this thoroughly congenial task was finished, I must say that it would have been difficult to find a more perfect and attractive specimen of a dolls' house in Strawberry Hill Gothic than that which now stood on Mr. Dillet's large kneehole table, lighted up by the evening sun which came slanting through three tall sash-windows.

It was quite six feet long, including the chapel or oratory which flanked the front on the left as you faced it, and the stable on the right. The main block on the house was, as I have said, in the Gothic manner: that is to say, the windows had pointed arches and were surmounted by what are called ogival hoods, with crockets and finials such as we see on the canopies of tombs built into church walls. At the angles were absurd turrets covered with arched panels. The chapel had pinnacles and buttresses, and a bell in the turret and coloured glass in the windows. When the front of the house was open you saw four large rooms, bedroom, dining room, drawing room, and kitchen, each with its appropriate furniture in a very complete state.

The stable on the right was in two storeys, with its proper complement of horses, coaches, and grooms, and with its clock and Gothic cupola for the clock bell.

Pages, of course, might be written on the outfit of the mansion—how many frying pans, how many gilt chairs, what pictures, carpets, chandeliers, fourposters, table linen, glass, crockery, and

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plate it possessed; but all this must be left to the imagination. I will only say that the base of plinth on which the house stood (for it was fitted with one of some depth which allowed of a flight of steps to the front door and a terrace, partly balustraded) contained a shallow drawer or drawers in which were neatly stored sets of embroidered curtains, changes of raiment for the inmates, and, in short, all the materials for an infinite series of variations and refittings of the most absorbing and delightful kind.

"Quintessence of Horace Walpole, that's what it is: he must have had something to do with the making of it." Such was Mr. Dillet's murmured reflection as he knelt before it in a reverent ecstasy. "Simply wonderful! This is my day and no mistake. Five hundred pound coming in this morning for that cabinet which I never cared about, and now this tumbling into my hands for a tenth, at the very most, of what it would fetch in town. Well, well! It almost makes one afraid something'll happen to counter it. Let's have a look at the population, anyhow."

Accordingly, he set them before him in a row. Again, here is an opportunity, which some would snatch at, of making an inventory of costume: I am incapable of it.

There was a gentleman and lady, in blue satin and brocade respectively. There were two children, a boy and a girl. There was a cook, a nurse, a footman, and there were the stable servants, two postilions, a coachman, two grooms.

"Anyone else? Yes, possibly."

The curtains of the fourposter in the bedroom were closely drawn round all four sides of it, and he put his finger in between them and felt in the bed. He drew the finger back hastily, for it almost seemed to him as if something had—not stirred, perhaps, but yielded—in an odd live way as he pressed it. Then he put back the curtains, which ran on rods in the proper manner, and extracted from the bed a white-haired old gentleman in a long linen nightdress and cap, and laid him down by the rest. The tale was complete.

Dinnertime was now near, so Mr. Dillet spent but five minutes in putting the lady and children into the drawing room, the gentleman into the dining room, the servants into the kitchen and stables, and the old man back into his bed. He retired into his dressing room next door, and we see and hear no more of him until something like eleven o'clock at night.

His whim was to sleep surrounded by some of the gems of his collection. The big room in which we have seen him contained his

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bed: bath, wardrobe, and all the appliances of dressing were in a commodious room adjoining: but his fourposter, which itself was a valued treasure, stood in the large room where he sometimes wrote, and often sat, and even received visitors. Tonight he repaired to it in a highly complacent frame of mind.

There was no striking clock within earshot—none on the staircase, none in the stable, none in the distant church tower. Yet it is indubitable that Mr. Dillet was startled out of a very pleasant slumber by a bell tolling one.

He was so much startled that he did not merely lie breathless with wide-open eyes, but actually sat up in his bed.

He never asked himself, till the morning hours, how it was that, though there was no light at all in the room, the dolls' house on the kneehole table stood out with complete clearness. But it was so. The effect was that of a bright harvest moon shining full on the front of a big white stone mansion—a quarter of a mile away it might be, and yet every detail was photographically sharp. There were trees about it, too—trees rising behind the chapel and the house. He seemed to be conscious of the scent of a cool, still September night. He thought he could hear an occasional stamp and clink from the stable, as of horses stirring. And with another shock he realised that, above the house, he was looking, not at the wall of his room with its pictures, but into the profound blue of a night sky.

There were lights, more than one, in the windows, and he quickly saw that this was no four-roomed house with a movable front, but one of many rooms, and staircases—a real house, but seen as if through the wrong end of a telescope. "You mean to show me something," he muttered to himself, and he gazed earnestly on the lighted windows. They would in real life have been shuttered or curtained, no doubt, he thought; but, as it was, there was nothing to intercept his view of what was being transacted inside the rooms.

Two rooms were lighted—one on the ground floor to the right of the door, one upstairs, on the left—the first brightly enough, the other rather dimly. The lower room was the dining room: a table was laid, but the meal was over, and only wine and glasses were left on the table. The man of the blue satin and the woman of the brocade were alone in the room, and they were talking very earnestly, seated close together at the table, their elbows on it: every now and again stopping to listen, as it seemed. Once *he* rose, came to the window and opened it, and put his head out and his hand to his ear. There was a lighted taper in a silver candlestick on a side-

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board. When the man left the window he seemed to leave the room also; and the lady, taper in hand, remained standing and listening. The expression on her face was that of one striving her utmost to keep down a fear that threatened to master her—and succeeding. It was a hateful face, too; broad, flat, and sly. Now the man came back and she took some small thing from him and hurried out of the room. He, too, disappeared, but only for a moment or two. The front door slowly opened and he stepped out and stood on the top of the perron, looking this way and that; then turned towards the upper window that was lighted, and shook his fist.

It was time to look at that upper window. Through it was seen a four-post bed: a nurse or other servant in an armchair, evidently sound asleep; in the bed an old man lying: awake, and, one would say, anxious, from the way in which he shifted about and moved his fingers, beating tunes on the coverlet. Beyond the bed a door opened. Light was seen on the ceiling, and the lady came in: she set down her candle on a table, came to the fireside, and roused the nurse. In her hand she had an old-fashioned wine bottle, ready uncorked. The nurse took it, poured some of the contents into a little silver saucepan, added some spice and sugar from casters on the table, and set it to warm on the fire. Meanwhile the old man in the bed beckoned feebly to the lady, who came to him, smiling, took his wrist as if to feel his pulse, and bit her lip as if in consternation. He looked at her anxiously, and then pointed to the window, and spoke. She nodded, and did as the man below had done; opened the casement and listened—perhaps rather ostentatiously: then drew in her head and shook it, looking at the old man, who seemed to sigh.

By this time the posset on the fire was steaming, and the nurse poured it into a small two-handled silver bowl and brought it to the bedside. The old man seemed disinclined for it and was waving it away, but the lady and the nurse together bent over him and evidently pressed it upon him. He must have yielded, for they supported him into a sitting position, and put it to his lips. He drank most of it, in several draughts, and they laid him down. The lady left the room, smiling good night to him, and took the bowl, the bottle, and the silver saucepan with her. The nurse returned to the chair, and there was an interval of complete quiet.

Suddenly the old man started up in his bed—and he must have uttered some cry, for the nurse started out of her chair and made but one step of it to the bedside. He was a sad and terrible sight—flushed in the face, almost to blackness, the eyes glaring

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whitely, both hands clutching at his heart, foam at his lips.

For a moment the nurse left him, ran to the door, flung it wide open, and, one supposes, screamed aloud for help, then darted back to the bed and seemed to try feverishly to soothe him—to lay him down—anything. But as the lady, her husband, and several servants, rushed into the room with horrified faces, the old man collapsed under the nurse's hands and lay back, and the features, contorted with agony and rage, relaxed slowly into calm.

A few moments later, lights showed out to the left of the house, and a coach with flambeaux drove up to the door. A white-wigged man in black got nimbly out and ran up the steps, carrying a small leather trunk-shaped box. He was met in the doorway by the man and his wife, she with her handkerchief clutched between her hands, he with a tragic face, but retaining his self-control. They led the newcomer into the dining room, where he set his box of papers on the table, and, turning to them, listened with a face of consternation at what they had to tell. He nodded his head again and again, threw out his hands slightly, declined, it seemed, offers of refreshment and lodging for the night, and within a few minutes came slowly down the steps, entering the coach and driving off the way he had come. As the man in blue watched him from the top of the steps, a smile not pleasant to see stole slowly over his fat white face. Darkness fell over the whole scene as the lights of the coach disappeared.

But Mr. Dillet remained sitting up in the bed: he had rightly guessed that there would be a sequel. The house front glimmered out again before long. But now there was a difference. The lights were in other windows, one at the top of the house, the other illuminating the range of coloured windows of the chapel. How he saw through these is not quite obvious, but he did. The interior was as carefully furnished as the rest of the establishment, with its minute red cushions on the desks, its Gothic stall-canopies, and its western gallery and pinnacled organ with gold pipes. On the centre of the black and white pavement was a bier: four tall candles burned at the corners. On the bier was a coffin covered with a pall of black velvet.

As he looked the folds of the pall stirred. It seemed to rise at one end: it slid downwards: it fell away, exposing the black coffin with its silver handles and nameplate. One of the tall candlesticks swayed and toppled over. Ask no more, but turn, as Mr. Dillet hastily did, and look in at the lighted window at the top of the house, where a boy and girl lay in two truckle beds, and a fourposter for

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the nurse rose above them. The nurse was not visible for the moment; but the father and mother were there, dressed now in mourning, but with very little sign of mourning in their demeanour. Indeed, they were laughing and talking with a good deal of animation, sometimes to each other, and sometimes throwing a remark to one or other of the children, and again laughing at the answers. Then the father was seen to go on tiptoe out of the room, taking with him as he went a white garment that hung on a peg near the door. He shut the door after him. A minute or two later it was slowly opened again, and a muffled head poked round it. A bent form of sinister shape stepped across to the truckle beds and suddenly stopped, threw up its arms, and revealed, of course, the father, laughing. The children were in agonies of terror, the boy with the bedclothes over his head, the girl throwing herself out of bed into her mother's arms. Attempts at consolation followed—the parents took the children on their laps, patted them, picked up the white gown and showed there was no harm in it, and so forth; and at last, putting the children back into bed, left the room with encouraging waves of the hand. As they left it, the nurse came in, and soon the light died down.

Still Mr. Dillet watched, immovable.

A new sort of light—not of lamp or candle—a pale ugly light, began to dawn around the door-case at the back of the room. The door was opening again. The seer does not like to dwell upon what he saw entering the room: he says it might be described as a frog—the size of a man—but it had scanty white hair about its head. It was busy about the truckle beds, but not for long. The sound of cries—faint, as if coming out of a vast distance—but, even so, infinitely appalling, reached the ear.

There were signs of a hideous commotion all over the house: lights moved along and up, and doors opened and shut, and running figures passed within the windows. The clock in the stable turret tolled one, and darkness fell again.

It was only dispelled once more, to show the house front. At the bottom of the steps dark figures were drawn up in two lines, holding flaming torches. More dark figures came down the steps, bearing first one, then another small coffin. And the lines of torchbearers with the coffins between them moved silently onward to the left.

The hours of night passed on—never so slowly, Mr. Dillet thought. Gradually he sank down from sitting to lying in his bed—but he did not close an eye: and early next morning he sent for the doctor.

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The doctor found him in a disquieting state of nerves, and recommended sea air. To a quiet place on the east coast he accordingly repaired by easy stages in his car.

One of the first people he met on the sea front was Mr. Chittenden, who, it appeared, had likewise been advised to take his wife away for a bit of a change.

Mr. Chittenden looked somewhat askance upon him when they met: and not without cause.

"Well, I don't wonder at you being a bit upset, Mr. Dillet. What? Yes, well, I might say 'orrible upset, to be sure, seeing what me and my poor wife went through ourselves. But I put it to you, Mr. Dillet, one of two things: was I going to scrap a lovely piece like that on the one 'and, or was I going to tell customers, 'I'm selling you a regular picture-palace-dramar in real life of the olden time, billed to perform regular at one o'clock A.M.'? Why, what would you 'ave said yourself? And next thing you know, two justices of the peace in the back parlour, and pore Mr. and Mrs. Chittenden off in a spring cart to the county asylum and everyone in the street saying, 'Ah, I thought it 'ud come to that. Look at the way the man drank!'—and me next door, or next door but one, to a total abstainer, as you know. Well, there was my position. What? Me 'ave it back in the shop? Well, what do *you* think? No, but I'll tell you what I will do. You shall have your money back, bar the ten pound I paid for it, and you make what you can."

Later in the day, in what is offensively called the "smoke room" of the hotel, a murmured conversation between the two went on for some time.

"How much do you really know about that thing, and where it came from?"

"Honest, Mr. Dillet, I don't know the 'ouse. Of course, it came out of the lumber room of a country 'ouse—that anyone could guess. But I'll go as far as say this, that I believe it's not a hundred miles from this place. Which direction and how far I've no notion. I'm only judging by guesswork. The man as I actually paid the cheque to ain't one of my regular men, and I've lost sight of him; but I 'ave the idea that this part of the country was his beat, and that's every word I can tell you. But now, Mr. Dillet, there's one thing that rather physicks me. That old chap—I suppose you saw him drive up to the door—I thought so: now, would he have been the medical man, do you take it? My wife would have it so, but I stuck to it that was the

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lawyer, because he had papers with him, and one he took out was folded up."

"I agree," said Mr. Dillet. "Thinking it over, I came to the conclusion that was the old man's will, ready to be signed."

"Just what I thought," said Mr. Chittenden, "and I took it that will would have cut out the young people, eh? Well, well! It's been a lesson to me, I know that. I shan't buy no more dolls' houses, nor waste no more money on the pictures—and as to this business of poisonin' grandpa, well, if I know myself, I never 'ad much of a turn for that. Live and let live: that's bin my motto throughout life, and I ain't found it a bad one."

Filled with these elevated sentiments, Mr. Chittenden retired to his lodgings. Mr. Dillet next day repaired to the local Institute, where he hoped to find some clue to the riddle that absorbed him. He gazed in despair at a long file of the Canterbury and York Society's publications of the parish registers of the district. No print resembling the house of his nightmare was among those that hung on the staircase and in the passages. Disconsolate, he found himself at last in a derelict room, staring at a dusty model of a church in a dusty glass case: *Model of St. Stephen's Church, Coxham, Presented by J. Merewether, Esq., of Ilbridge House, 1877. The work of his ancestor James Merewether, d. 1786.* There was something in the fashion of it that reminded him dimly of his horror. He retraced his steps to a wall map he had noticed, and made out that Ilbridge House was in Coxham Parish. Coxham was, as it happened, one of the parishes of which he had retained the name when he glanced over the file of printed registers, and it was not long before he found in them the record of the burial of Roger Milford, aged seventy-six, on the eleventh of September, 1757, and of Roger and Elizabeth Merewether, aged nine and seven, on the nineteenth of the same month. It seemed worthwhile to follow up this clue, frail as it was; and in the afternoon he drove out to Coxham. The east end of the north aisle of the church is a Milford chapel, and on its north wall are tablets to the same persons; Roger, the elder, it seems, was distinguished by all the qualities which adorn "the Father, the Magistrate, and the Man": the memorial was erected by his attached daughter Elizabeth, "who did not long survive the loss of a parent ever solicitous for her welfare, and of two amiable children." The last sentence was plainly an addition to the original inscription.

A yet later slab told of James Merewether, husband of Elizabeth, "who in the dawn of life practised, not without success, those arts

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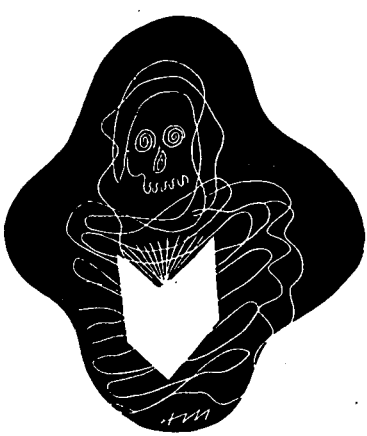
which, had he continued their exercise, might in the opinion of the most competent judges have earned for him the name of the British Vitruvius: but who, overwhelmed by the visitation which deprived him of an affectionate partner and a blooming offspring, passed his Prime and Age in a secluded yet elegant Retirement: his grateful Nephew and Heir indulges a pious sorrow by this too brief recital of his excellences."

The children were more simply commemorated. Both died on the night of the twelfth of September.

Mr. Dillet felt sure that in Ilbridge House he had found the scene of his drama. In some old sketchbook, possibly in some old print, he may yet find convincing evidence that he is right. But the Ilbridge House of today is not that which he sought; it is an Elizabethan erection of the forties, in red brick with stone quoins and dressings. A quarter of a mile from it, in a low part of the park, backed by ancient, stag-horned, ivy-strangled trees and thick undergrowth, are marks of a terraced platform overgrown with rough grass. A few stone balusters lie here and there, and a heap or two, covered with nettles and ivy, of wrought stones with badly carved crockets. This, someone told Mr. Dillet, was the site of an older house.

As he drove out of the village, the hall clock struck four, and Mr. Dillet started up and clapped his hands to his ears. It was not the first time he had heard that bell.

Awaiting an offer from the other side of the Atlantic, the dolls' house still reposes, carefully sheeted, in a loft over Mr. Dillet's stables, whither Collins conveyed it on the day when Mr. Dillet started for the seacoast.



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Charles Ardai is one of the youngest writers ever to have been published in EQMM, *but his first association with our magazine was not as a contributor. Mr. Ardai came to work at Davis Publications, which then owned* EQMM, *at the age of sixteen, as a part-time assistant in the subsidiary rights department. Within a very short time he was submitting stories to both* EQMM *and* Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine *and helping to compile anthologies of mystery fiction. He later attended Columbia University and makes his career in investment banking . . .*

MASKS

by CHARLES ARDAI

Night had fallen, and the sounds of carnival shook the walls with a hungry samba beat. The crowd in the street clapped and cheered and stamped its feet, drowning out the music. Firecrackers exploded and ricocheted from the rooftops. Men cheered. Women sang.

But inside the room, everyone was silent.

The three men who occupied the side of the room closest to the door sat with their hands on the arms of their chairs. One, a tall blond with his hair pulled back in a ponytail, gripped the armrests tightly. Another, a black man in a lightweight silk suit, drummed his fingers against the wood. He tapped steadily, slowly, patiently. The third man wore a sealskin jacket and American designer shoes and a bolo tie with a spider encased in amber for a clasp. He leaned forward and put all his weight onto his forearms, as though at any moment he might launch himself toward the man seated behind the desk.

The man behind the desk held his hands before him, his gloved fingers interlaced, his elbows resting lightly on the blotter. He wore a dark suit with a black shirt and a hat with a long brim. Beneath the brim, a sliver of skin peeked out above the top of a translucent plastic mask. The mask concealed and distorted his features. It was

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possible to tell that he was dark-skinned, but beyond that nothing could be told for certain.

The lips of the mask did not move even when the lips behind them finally did. The effect, of pink squirming behind the fixed lips of the fixed face, was unnerving. But if the other men found it so, they showed no sign.

"You are not the Jomon." The voice was flat, muffled, deliberately unmodulated. The words hung in the air over the desk, the more lifeless for being underscored by the sound of music and laughter outside.

"You see the evidence," the blond said. "You see the pictures."

"I see pictures. Anyone can take pictures."

The black man stopped drumming his fingers. "Not anyone could have taken those pictures. They haven't found Monterrez yet."

"So you found him. That doesn't mean you killed him."

"We killed him," the blond said.

"So you say."

The third man rose slightly from his chair, in answer to the insult, but the blond made a motion to him and he sat down again.

The blond said, "Mr. . . . ?"

"No names," the man in the mask said.

"Mr. No Names," the blond said. "What proof do you want?"

The man in the mask collected the four black-and-white photographs that lay on the desk and held them out to the men. The blond took them and slipped them into his pocket.

"There is a job I know for sure was performed by the Jomon. The name was—" The man looked down at a pad of notes. "Madradas. Lienore and Maria Madradas. Bring me photos of their bodies. If you are the Jomon."

"And if you are the police?"

"I am not."

"And if you are . . . ?" the blond said.

"If I am the police, then there are officers already outside the door who will arrest you as you try to leave. You know this is not the case. Waste no more of my time with your games and your pitiful impersonation. The Jomon are not game players. If they knew you were using their name they would leave you dead in a gutter this very night."

The blond's knuckles whitened as he clenched the arm of the chair tighter. The black man's fingers drummed on and on.

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"Leave now," said the man in the mask. "And bring me proof if you can."

The blond stood up and the others followed. They walked to the door and opened it. There were no officers waiting for them.

With the door open, the tumult from the street was even louder. Then the door was closed, the noise was deadened, and the three men were gone.

Ramon Madradas was a tired-looking man, and had been even when he was young and active. At age forty-three, having lived through war, marriage, the birth of two daughters, and the death of one, he had finally grown into his features. His eyelids hung. His cheeks drooped. The lines in his forehead turned down at either end. Though he smiled easily and often, it was a weary smile. And though he stood straight, it was a weary stance: one hip higher than the other, all his weight resting on one leg as though he barely had the strength or interest to hold himself upright.

His wife, Lienore, was taller than he was, and so was his daughter, Maria. In family photographs, he usually stood between them. In some, they looked at each other and smiled over the top of his head.

Lienore was heavyset and broad-shouldered, with features typical of Brazilian women, particularly those born in the north, near Venezuela. She had straight black hair and brown skin, pink fingers, wide eyes. Ramon had the stiff, thick hair of the country-born and the map of minor scars, all along his arms and on his face, that was the property of most men who did not spend their youth in the academy.

Maria showed the advantages of a girl brought up in the city, on good food and clean water. She had her mother's eyes and hair, but the hair she wore long, down to her waist, and the eyes, when outlined and daubed with shadow, looked almost exotic. She was thin and well proportioned, long of leg and neck and forehead. She almost looked like a heavily tanned North American woman, and once or twice on the beach had in fact been mistaken for one. She had allowed the misconception to take hold and had said nothing to dispel it, not from shame, or at least not entirely, but out of pleasure at being able to cross from one world to the other. Her mother received looks from these men, of contempt and dismissal, that were entirely different from the looks Maria received. When she walked alone on the beach, Maria called herself Maria Stone.

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Ramon knew of this and accepted it as inevitable. He had himself left the countryside for the city, had moved from a shanty to an apartment over a store he meant ultimately to own, and had, out of shame and a desire to re-create himself as a cosmopolitan and a success, never recontacted his family. He had been seventeen, as Maria was now. So he understood her impulse and accepted, as a father's burden, his sorrow.

He had finally bought the store during a drought, when it had seemed that the tourists, too, and not only the rain, had dried up for good. The old man he had worked for had taken sick and then died and his son, who inherited, had wanted nothing to do with the store. He sold it to Ramon for the contents of Ramon's meager savings account, which left Ramon and Lienore unable to buy a new bed to replace the broken one in which they slept and in possession of a bodega whose stock was stale and whose clientele was currently vacationing elsewhere, in less punishing climates.

But then the drought had ended and the big coastal hotels had gone up, and one evening in a cruelly hot August, infant Maria had come screaming into the world. The store had supported them. A new bed was bought. Ramon bought himself a Jeep and a carved headstone for the grave of Melita, who had suffocated at eleven months in her crib. Lienore had a pair of nice dresses that she almost never took out of their plastic sheaths; Maria had bikinis to wear, and to take off, in front of the boys who stayed at the hotels.

And the day came when, walking in the street, Ramon passed Maria and a tall Caucasian fellow walking arm in arm and Maria blushed, turned her eyes away from him, and steered the young man in another direction so that their paths would not cross. Ramon took this, in an awful way, as fulfillment of all his ambitions. That he could raise a daughter so much better than he was that she could feel embarrassed at the sight of him! How far the Madradas name had advanced in the world! He cried that night when he told Lienore, but he was not entirely unhappy.

For a dozen years, and more than a dozen, the store prospered, and the Madradas fortune, though still meager, grew. Ramon paid visits to the owner of the building next to his, where a steakhouse with outdoor tables did brisk business every night of the week. Discussions began, papers were signed, hands shaken. And now Ramon, who owned a bodega and a steakhouse, felt his eyes start to wander toward the cantina across the street.

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But the drought returned, as droughts will, and hotels with huge, always-full pools notwithstanding, the flow of Norte-Americanos slowed to a trickle, and then to less than a trickle—a drip, really.

Ramon took down the outdoor tables—who now wanted to sit outdoors?—and installed a pair of ceiling fans. He put signs up in the windows of the bodega advertising special sales, on suntan oil and postcards and paper fans, and then took the signs down when it became clear that they brought no one in. He had a half interest in the cantina by this time, and people did still come in to drink, but the balance shifted and what had once only pretended to be a rough bar for the benefit of tourists became the genuine article, peopled with out-of-work natives and angry hotel workers laid off by their belt-tightening employers. Ramon cut his steak order in half, and then in half again, and finally switched to grilled hamburgers instead. He closed the bodega for longer siestas every afternoon. Some days he didn't open at all.

Then a day came when the bills started to arrive three at a time and the money he kept in the bank, no longer as savings but as a buffer against catastrophe, was gone, down to the last cruzeiro. Sales at the bodega were stagnant. Ramon's suppliers refused to come to restock the shelves. Pescador Street was half-deserted, storefronts empty after having been abandoned by their discouraged owners. Having lived through a drought before, Ramon was determined to see this one through as well. But in the end he arrived reluctantly at the conclusion that without additional money from some source—any source—there was no way that he could.

It was then that one of his suppliers, a man named Borges who was full of pity and small kindnesses and who never stopped coming to see Ramon even after his bosses told him that Ramon's bodega was off-limits, told Ramon, in a whisper, of the Jomon.

He said their name quickly and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand as soon as the word was out, as though its mere passage between his lips had dirtied him. Ramon, who had never heard of the Jomon, nevertheless picked up on the significance of Borges's gesture.

"They are loansharks, the Jomon?"

Borges shook his head, but said, "Yes, they are loansharks. But they are more than that."

"What more?"

Borges groped with his hands in the air, as though trying to pick out with them the words his mouth found so distasteful. "They

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are . . . young men. Who think of themselves as criminals. And they *are* criminals, of course, but not the type they think they are. They fancy themselves gangsters, you understand? Like the Mafia in Chicago. But they are just three punks with guns. They—" Borges spat on the floor and then rubbed it out with the tip of his shoe. "They are killers."

"You mean," Ramon said, "they lend money and then kill you if you do not pay it back?"

"They kill you if you do not pay it back. They kill you if you pay it back but they don't like the way you look at them. They kill you if someone says, 'Here's some money, kill this man whom I don't like.' "

"You mean they kill for money?"

"I mean they'd kill for a glass of tequila."

"So why are you telling me about them?"

"Because," Borges said, "you are my friend. I see you every week starving a little more. Without money your stores will die and you will die, too. I see Maria and she is too skinny. I tell you because I don't have any money to give you and you need money and if you want it, the Jomon will give you what you need."

"And then they will kill me."

"No, not if you pay them back the way they tell you to. They do not kill everyone with whom they deal. I have taken their money, Ramon, and I am still here. I seriously say to you: think about it. Because I cannot see you like this any longer, it breaks my heart."

That night, Ramon sat behind the counter at the bodega and listed on a sheet of paper all the monies he needed to repay and figured out how much it would take to keep the stores going at a minimum level for six months. By which time the drought, which had persisted through two summers already, would have to have lifted—nothing lasted forever. He added up his column of figures, circled the sum, and sat staring at it until dawn. Then he telephoned Borges to have him put the word out on the street that he was in need of the Jomon's services.

The man in the mask held the pictures in front of him one at a time. He looked at them slowly, through the milky layer of plastic and the pinprick holes in front of his eyes. One picture showed a middle-aged woman collapsed against the foot of a staircase, her hands outstretched above her head, a bullet hole in her neck. The other showed a young woman on the floor of a dressing cabinet of the sort

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that were set up on the periphery of every beach. Her long black hair covered most of her face, but anyone who knew Maria Madradas—or Maria Stone—would have recognized her. And the purple marks on her throat from where she had been strangled were clearly visible.

The man in the mask passed the photos back across the desk and along with them he passed a plastic shopping bag filled with rubber-banded thousand-cruzeiro notes. The blond pocketed the photos and passed the bag to the man sitting next to him. This man, who had worn a sealskin jacket the day before, was now wearing a white T-shirt and, over it, a suit jacket. He pulled out several stacks of bills and thumbed through them.

"The proof is to your satisfaction?" the blond said.

The man in the mask nodded.

"Good. So who is it you want us to kill?"

The man said nothing. He passed a photograph of his own across the desk. It showed a man in an overcoat smiling for the camera.

The blond's eyebrows rose.

Ramon sat across a wide wooden table from the three young men, sunlight streaming into his eyes from a window high on the wall above their heads. He found himself unable to sit still. Borges's warnings rang in his ears: be polite, answer their questions, be direct. They are doing you a favor. Keep this in mind.

Ramon wrung his hands under the table and tried to keep the sound of his anxiety out of his voice. "I need the money until the first of October. By then, I will be on track again and I will begin to pay you back. You will have all the money and the interest by Christmas."

"No. You will pay us the total sum on the first of October." This came from the tall blond man sitting directly across from Ramon.

Ramon swallowed. "Yes, sir."

"And the interest, let's see . . ." He conferred briefly with the other two. "For interest you will owe ten percent."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"Per month."

The room fell silent and except for his own breathing, Ramon heard no sound at all. "Yes, sir," he said.

"And if you do not pay," the blond said, holding up a photograph of Ramon with his wife and daughter that had been taken from a moving car outside the bodega, "we will kill you. Third." He pointed

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first to Lienore and then to Maria. "Third, you understand, because we will kill them first."

Ramon felt his stomach turn to water. "Yes. I understand. You will be paid."

"We will be paid, that is correct. Remember that and we will do business well together."

Ramon sat, squinting against the light, and prayed. He prayed for a good season, prayed for rain, prayed for his family's safety, prayed that the Jomon were honorable men. Under their cool gaze, he prayed that everything would work out well.

And he prayed that Lienore would never find out what he had done.

"Ramon Madradas?"

The man in the mask nodded.

The blond lowered the photograph. "Why do you want Madradas dead?"

"Is that your business?"

"No."

"Correct," said the man in the mask. "So don't ask."

The blond passed the photograph to the man sitting next to him, who looked at it and passed it on to the black man. Each scrutinized the picture carefully.

"How did you know we killed Madradas's family?" the blond asked.

"Everyone knows," the man in the mask said. "Except the police."

"Yes, except the police," the blond agreed. The men he was with smiled.

"You will find Madradas outside his bodega tonight at eight-thirty. He will turn his back to lock the night gate. This is when you will come up behind him and shoot him."

The blond nodded.

"You will each shoot once."

"Why?" This was from the man in the T-shirt, who had just finished counting the money.

"Because I want to make sure he is dead."

"Dead only requires one bullet," the blond said.

"Maybe," the man in the mask said. "But I am paying you triple what you asked. That buys me three."

"Very well. Three shots. What then?"

"Then we never see each other again."

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"Naturally. I mean what do you want done with the body?"

The man in the mask paused, as though in thought, before answering. "Just leave it in the street," he said. "Let someone else clean up the mess."

The money had come in a courier package. Ramon had received it from a young boy, thinking that the parcel contained boxes of envelopes and postage labels he had ordered from Sao Paolo. Instead, it held paper-wrapped bundles of currency. Ramon had the package half unwrapped before he realized what it was and from whom it had come. He looked up, but the delivery boy was already gone.

With the money had come a note: "10%, October 1."

Ramon hid the money in a cabinet in the cellar and rationed it carefully, day by day, buying only what he needed, paying off his bills one at a time. To Lienore he explained by saying that business was improving—which, in fact, by small degrees it was. Suppliers agreed to supply him again now that his debts were erased. Borges resumed making legitimate stops, restocking Ramon's shelves with snack cakes and soft drinks. Sales remained slow, but Ramon had the money to fall back on. The store survived through the worst of it.

And as the heat of summer passed, as, at last, occasional storms came to invigorate the parched landscape, Ramon saw tourists return. When it rained in the middle of the day and tourists angrily ran to take shelter in his store, or his restaurant, or the cantina, Ramon was overjoyed. The drought was ending; life was resuming.

When the first of October came, he found he had used only a little more than half of the original loan—he had, he discovered, overestimated his need. He had also collected enough to pay the interest, which was more than half again as much as the original amount. It galled him to think that he could have asked for less and thereby paid less in interest, but the past was the past. For now he was only concerned to get over the need to repay the loan.

He returned, on the morning of the first, to the house where he had met the Jomon before, carrying his precious parcel under his arm. He placed it on the table with a great sense of relief and accomplishment, feeling as though he were completing a legitimate business transaction. Ramon was not ashamed of what he had done.

But the three men then counted the money, insisting that Ramon remain while they did so; and when they were finished they asked

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him a question that swept over him like a cold wind and made his soul curl up inside him.

"Where," the blond asked in an easy and innocent tone, "is the rest of it?"

"The rest?" Ramon said.

"The rest. Ten percent weekly over a period of six months equals two hundred sixty percent. Plus the original amount, of course." The blond then did some calculations on a pocket calculator and came up with a figure, which he showed Ramon.

"I am sorry, sir," Ramon said, with all the calmness he could command, "but you said ten percent per *month*. Not per week."

"Per month? Are you mad? You could practically get money from a bank at that rate."

"But it is what you said," Ramon whispered desperately.

"Is it? Show me."

And Ramon pulled the note that had come with the money out of his pocket, suddenly aware that it said neither week nor month on it, and knowing in that instant that this had been a deliberate omission. They took the note from him, pretended to look at it, noted that it said only what it said, "10%, October 1," and nothing more. But, of course, they said, it was understood by all that interest was a weekly matter.

Ramon could not contain himself. He threw himself at the table, knocking over the stack of money he had collected so painstakingly over the course of half a year. "Here is your money," he screamed. "It is what you asked for, to the cruzeiro. You know that as well as I do. I cannot pay you more. I cannot pay what you ask. I don't have it. Take this—it is what we agreed on." He turned to leave and made it almost to the door.

"Your family will not appreciate your attitude," the blond said.

Ramon turned back and said, with great fear in his voice, "You will not touch my family."

"Not if you pay," the blond said.

"I cannot pay."

"In cash, maybe not," the blond said. "But I think we can make other arrangements. Your restaurant has been prosperous, I believe; and you own a piece of El Cantoria. Sign these over to us and we will consider the debt canceled."

So this was the point of the double cross, Ramon thought, to steal from him all he had spent his life to earn. "I will not give you that. And you will not touch my family," he said. "I have paid. Our

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dealings are through." Then he turned and left, on legs so unstable that he had to sit for twenty minutes in his Jeep before he felt he could drive home safely.

That they would try to squeeze extra money out of him Ramon might have imagined—but on this scale! He could not comprehend it. Did they really think that a poor man, even one with successful businesses, could pay almost three hundred percent interest? Then to request that he relinquish his businesses to them! Had they really expected him to give in?

He drove home in a rage, ready to pack Lienore and Maria up and take them away: out of the country, into the United States, anywhere. He would not be a slave to a gang of sharks, nor would he live in fear for his life. They would go away, even this very night if necessary. They would start fresh and make none of the same mistakes again. He prepared his explanation to Lienore as he walked through the bodega to the stairs in back that led up to their apartment.

But when he got there, he found Lienore lying dead against the stairs, her arms flung up over her head, blood still draining from the wound in her neck.

Ramon ran to her, knelt next to her, cradled her corpse in his arms. Her blood ran onto his hands and down his neck. He started to howl like a baby. One of the men who worked in the steakhouse heard his cries and found him, holding Lienore tightly to his chest. The man left and returned a few moments later with a policeman.

The police decided that Lienore had been the victim of a burglar. And when, later that day, they found Maria's body in a changing booth at the beach, they dismissed it as the work of a sex criminal. These were the kind of random tragedies that happened every day; that it had happened to two members of the same family in a single day seemed to the disinterested police merely an odd twist of fate. They offered Ramon their condolences, but not their protection or their further assistance.

Ramon numbly accepted all they told him and said not a word about the Jomon. He barely heard the policemen's explanations or his own account, which he repeated three times, of how he had found his wife's body. His mind was filled with the picture of his wife's blood pouring onto his palms and running between his fingers, of his daughter's bruised throat and lifeless eyes, and of the Jomon's threat that they would kill him, too, should he fail to cooperate. His ears burned with the words of his daughter's friends, who had told

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him (but not the police) that they had seen Maria last in the company of a long-haired blond who had asked them, before leading Maria away, to give his regards to her father.

Ramon ran, first thing the next morning, to his safety-deposit box in the bank. He took the papers of ownership for the steakhouse and the cantina to the house of the Jomon and begged to be let in. Then, with tears streaming down his face, he handed the papers over into the hands that had murdered his daughter, felt those hands clasp his and clap his back and then push him once more out into the street, where he lay down in the dark mouth of an alley and wept.

The door closed behind the Jomon; the noises from outside grew quiet once more. The man in the mask picked up the telephone on the desk.

He dialed the police.

"Tonight, at eight-thirty, a man will be killed on Pescador Street by the Jomon. I suggest you have men on hand to apprehend them."

Then, as the tiny voice started squeaking questions at him through the earpiece, the man in the mask hung up.

The police, in masks of gold brocade and beaded ponchos and feather headdresses, filter onto the street and mix with the crowd. It is not yet eight o'clock and the sun has just set.

The revelry begins slowly tonight—the army of marchers is farther uptown, at the start of the grand parade, and though the parade will pass along Pescador Street on its way to the beach, it begins in a more prosperous area, at the request of that area's merchants, barmen, and restaurateurs. The crowd on Pescador Street as the hour changes is all native: dressed madly, gaily, beating tambours and stamping its feet, but not in stagey fashion, not, this time, for the benefit of American television.

A pair of drunks stagger around the entrance to El Cantoria, unaware that they do so in front of a dozen policemen. On another night they might be taken in, but tonight they are let be. The police communicate with silent glances and small gestures. Thirty minutes remain.

In his bodega, Ramon Madradas tallies the day's receipts and makes a note of the amount in a log he keeps on the shelf under the register. He strips off his apron, balls it up, and leaves it lying on

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the counter. He moves with short, quick steps around the store, checking each aisle, pushing cans of food back into place, restacking a fallen pile of newspapers. He fears the foot-stamping outside and ticks off in his mind the minutes before the parade will reach Pescador Street. There is just enough time to close the shop. Normally he would then climb upstairs to the apartment he once shared with his wife and daughter, but tonight—tonight is the anniversary of their death and of his capitulation, and tonight will be different.

Ramon turns face down a photograph of himself and his family that he keeps beside the register. He lays it down gently, careful not to scratch the delicate frame. Today, Maria would have been nineteen. Lienore would have been forty-six. If Ramon had died when they died, he would never have aged past fifty. But he is fifty-one now and they are dead, the buildings next door and across the street are in the hands of their killers, and Ramon feels pressing down upon him as though it were a physical weight the wrongness of it all, the enormity of the injustice.

Atone! a voice from deep inside him cries. For cowardice and weakness, atone! And Ramon, knowing it for the voice of his soul, shies away, nervously wrings his hands, searches around the bodega for anything to do rather than step outside into the street.

In the back room of El Cantoria, the Jomon arrange their costumes. They are dressed as oriental kings, with spangled vests and bright turbans and made-up faces. Each carries a revolver in the pocket of his sash. The blond checks his wristwatch and looks out through the slats of the front door. It is almost eight-thirty; the parade is coming closer every minute.

At the edge of the sidewalk, the captain of police, who is dressed as a gaucho, glances around at every face he can scan, looking for a sign. All are strained with anticipation—the music and carousing of the parade is almost here. But which face, the captain asks himself, is that of a man about to die? Which is the face of the killer? And where, among all the painted faces and papier-mâché masks, is the man who called in the tip? There is no way to tell. And as the darkness deepens, it becomes more and more difficult to keep everything in view. Faces emerge from shadow and then disappear once more as people dance past streetlights. Lanterns on the walls create as many shadows as they dispel.

The numbers on the captain's watch dial glow green with faint luminescence. 8:26. Four more minutes. He walks across the street toward the Madradas bodega, whose lights are still on. Perhaps from

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there he will be able to see something that will help him.

Ramon paces just inside the door. He remembers, all of a sudden, the last look Maria gave him on the day she died. She was leaving in the morning to walk on the beach and with her goodbye kiss she gave him a look of fervent anticipation that seemed to say that she expected something good to happen that day. It was a look he'd seen often in Maria's eyes; he had taken no special notice of it and no special pleasure. Had he known he would never see it again, he might have held her longer, might have drunk deeper of the moment. Now the memory of it flits before him, teasing him. Already it is gone. He cannot get it back, though he tries. Now he can only picture her dead eyes and Lienore's blood on the stairs and his own tears as he knelt cringing before the Jomon and begging for his own life to be spared.

The memory hardens him. He flicks off the lights in the store and steps outside.

The lights in the bodega go off. The police captain moves off toward the well-lit corner where he sees two of his lieutenants standing. Maybe they have seen something from there.

The Jomon watch as Ramon emerges from his bodega. They swing open the cantina's doors and step out into the street. The parade still has not arrived. But it will any minute. Everyone in the street seems to be holding his breath. The Jomon walk slowly across the street.

Ramon looks over the crowd milling about in the street, winces as the wave of sound washes over him. The door slams shut behind him from its own weight. Reluctantly, he turns to pull the night gate down and lock it.

The captain looks at his watch—8:31.

At last the parade rounds the corner, led by a trio of acrobats who turn cartwheels, shouting. The crowd moves out of their path, flowing onto the sidewalk.

The Jomon reach the sidewalk outside the bodega. They are surrounded on all sides, but everyone is watching the parade as it barrels down the middle of the street. They pull their guns.

Ramon struggles with the night gate's lock. The key turns but the lock doesn't catch. He shakes the key; he shakes the lock.

The Jomon stand behind him.

Raise their guns.

Fire into his head. His back. And finally, since a third shot was promised, into the fleshy part of his right leg.

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The shots go almost unheard amid the cracks and pops of firecrackers and Roman candles. Almost. But the police hear them and know them for what they are. They glance quickly around to find their source.

Ramon collapses in his pooling blood. The Jomon begin to vanish, moving as quickly as they can through the crowd. A woman next to Ramon screams.

The police captain sees her scream, sees the terror in her face, sees the men moving away from her in three different directions. He blows a shrill blast on his police whistle which cuts through all the other noise. The police push people to the ground as they chase the fleeing killers. One policeman tackles the blond around the knees. Another steps into the black man's path and, seeing the man's gun come up, fires point-blank into his chest. The third man disappears into the steakhouse, but the police captain pursues him inside and corners him in the back of the kitchen. Once the man is handcuffed, the policeman leads him back outside.

The street is in chaos. The grand parade, unaware of what it is heading into, continues to pour into Pescador Street. Some of the policemen try in vain to calm the crowd. Two men lie dead in the street, two men lie in handcuffs. No one knows what has just happened.

The police captain stands with one of his lieutenants over the body of Ramon Madradas. He has to shout to make himself heard. "I don't understand it. Why him? Why would anyone want Madradas dead?"

"Perhaps he failed to pay off a debt," the lieutenant shouts back.

"But then why did we get the tip on when and where the murder would be?"

The lieutenant shrugs. "Someone wanted Madradas dead and wanted the Jomon caught also."

"Yes, but who?" The captain holds tight to the cuffed wrists of his captive. He turns and addresses the question to him. "Who?"

The young man shakes his head. "I don't know," he says. "He wore a mask."

The man in the mask let the receiver drop into its cradle, silencing the voice of the woman at the police station. *Who are you?* she had

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started to ask. *Where are you calling from? How do you know about this?*

He stood up, pushed the chair back from the desk, and walked to the window. It was light outside; eight-thirty felt a lifetime away. But the Jomon would be successful, he was sure. That meant he had only five hours left to live.

He dropped the hat and gloves on the desk, pulled the mask over the top of his head, and smoothed down his thick, stiff hair. His hair needed to be cut, and looking at his hands he realized that his fingernails needed cutting as well. It didn't matter any longer, but it bothered him, so he pulled a penknife out of his pocket, sat on the edge of his desk, and pared his tough, yellow nails.

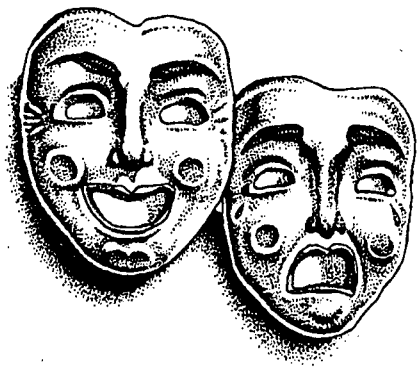
If the Jomon lived, they would lead the police to this office he had rented, where they would find nothing. The money, all saved in cash over the course of the year, was untraceable. The mask and hat he would throw away on his way to the bodega. Amid the refuse of Carnivale, with its thousand identical masks and hats, they would never be found.

He would not be buried at the public expense. All the money he had left would go to Borges, who would use it for a proper funeral.

And the Jomon, caught committing a murder under the very eyes of the police, would surely get the punishment they deserved.

Ramon closed and pocketed his penknife. Then he began the trek back to the bodega. Siesta was over.

He threw the mask out in one street-corner garbage can, the hat in another. His hand trembled as he unlocked the bodega's front door for the last time.



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a ***NEW*** short story by

DONALD OLSON

From Donald Olson we have this month a wolf-in-sheep's-clothing tale. Mr. Olson is the author of seven novels, but his first and abiding love is the short story. . . .

TRIAL BY FIRE

by DONALD OLSON

She could have shut her eyes and still known the season. The breath of autumn was on the air, that spicy blend of scents: woodsmoke and ripe apples and hay drying on the hills. But Selena Winship's eyes were wide open and blue as the glassy surface of the lake she gazed down upon as she waited there in the garden of what she had called, seeing it for the first time three years ago, "the darlingest little house in all the world." Purple phlox and Japanese iris and hollyhocks glowed against its freshly painted white shingles.

She gave a little start, as if rudely awakened from a pleasant dream, when Rob from next door stole up behind her and tickled the smooth white nape of her neck below a tangle of fiery red curls.

"You're late," she snapped. "I told you to be here by ten."

"They're not home, are they?"

"No, but they've only gone to the market. Oh, good, you brought it."

Rob set the plastic gallon milk jug on the grass and dropped down beside Selena. "I don't see why it had to be a milk jug. You're not supposed to keep gasoline in a plastic container."

"We're not going to *keep* it in there, idiot. I told you it had to be a milk jug. Never mind why."

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Rob's blue eyes, paler than Selena's but more striking in his deeply tanned face, regarded the milk jug with a worried frown. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"Not getting cold feet, are you?"

"No."

"You'd better not. I'm depending on you. You're being very well paid for what little I'm asking you to do."

"Arson," he replied peevishly, "is not what I'd call a little thing."

"But you're not *doing* it, are you, Rob? I'm the one taking all the risk." She looked sceptically at the milk jug. "You're sure that'll be enough?"

"Are you kidding? A cup would be enough."

Selena looked up at the sky, where a lazy flock of white clouds had strayed into the field of blue. "It's not supposed to rain tomorrow, is it? How ghastly if a downpour ruined everything."

"With that much gasoline I doubt it would matter." He sprang lightly to his feet and surveyed the little house with a somber look of regret. "Pity I had to work my butt off for nothing."

"Work for which you'll be well paid. And who's going to think someone burned down a house they'd just repainted?" She tilted her head to one side, admiring the coral-colored door, the gray shutters and white shingles. "You know, from a distance it does rather look like a smaller model of our Valley house. Same colors, anyway."

Rob turned to look down at Selena with an air of cautious surmise. "Look, Selena, I know I'm not supposed to ask any questions, but I can't help wondering, you're always so damn mysterious, I mean about what happened in the Valley."

Selena's glance was like the warning flash of a knife. "What *about* what happened in the Valley?"

Even more hesitantly, Rob said: "Well, I know you were burned out, you told me that much, okay? But—look, now don't get mad—just tell me the truth. It wasn't—you didn't . . . ?"

"Didn't what?" Selena's tone was icy.

"You didn't *do* it, did you?"

Selena sprang up, one arm flung out as if about to strike. "What a *beastly* thing to say!"

"Look, I'm sorry—"

"Someone *died* in that fire. Someone I loved. How dare you even *suggest* anything so vile?" Bursting into tears as easily as the most accomplished actress, Selena flung herself down again on the grass.

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Rob made awkward, fumbling motions without actually stooping to touch her. "Selena, I'm sorry. It's just that I don't understand you sometimes. You don't seem to want to tell me anything."

"Maybe it's because you're too stupid to understand, ever think of that?" Then suddenly, as if a cloudburst had passed, she regained her composure, her manner becoming sadder, reflective. "I love it here at the lake. Everything was fine for two years. Beryl and I got along okay. I know she doesn't exactly dote on me—I'm too smart for my own good she's always telling me—but she is my mother and she does control the trust fund. Oh yes, we got along—until Gordon came into the picture. A guy over thirty with a pigtail! Isn't that *de trop?*"

"What's that mean?"

"Too much. But I'm a woman of the world. If Beryl chooses to go gaga over some *hunk,* that's her business, not mine. But *marry* him? No way, baby. The minute she dropped that on me I knew I had to do something to stop it. Gordon's nothing but a gigolo, all he's after is the money. But it won't happen, you can count on that. I'm going to get rid of Gordon. No ding-dong wedding bells for that jerk. What happened in the Valley gave me the idea."

"I hope you know you're playing with fire," said Rob with a grin.

Selena gave him a withering look. "Is that supposed to be funny? Is that your idea of *wit?*"

"Oh, don't be so touchy."

"I've already got him worried. I keep giving him these *looks.* If Beryl had any brains, she'd know I'm doing her a favor by getting rid of Gordon. She'll thank me some day."

"You really hate him, don't you?"

"With a passion. I mean, a *pigtail.* Really! And the way he struts around in that bikini. Fancies he's Mr. Universe or something. God, it makes me sick the way Beryl fawns over him. He deserves just what's coming to him." In another lightning change of mood, the fierceness evaporated into a seductive tenderness as she laid a hand on Rob's thigh. "And you deserve what's coming to you."

Rob's eyes glistened. "I wish it was a Harley, like Gordon's."

"Maybe some day, if you're nice to me." She looked around as they heard a car door slam beyond the trees. "They're back already. Now you know what you have to do tomorrow night. And don't jump the gun. Don't call the fire department until you're sure it's hopeless. Now hide the milk jug. We'll have our sandwiches here in the garden. I can't bear to be at the table with *him.* You should see the way

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he eats." She made exaggerated chopping motions with her teeth. They both started giggling.

While Beryl put the groceries away, Gordon stripped off his T-shirt and wandered out onto the deck where he braced his powerful arms against the redwood rail and proceeded to do a series of push-ups until Beryl joined him carrying two glasses. A sleek, well-groomed brunette, she was one of those women who had perfected the art of concealing her age.

"Cocktail before lunch, darling?"

Gordon leaned over the rail, staring down through the trees to the garden below. "I see lunch is already being served. Guess we're not invited."

Beryl came to stand beside him, one hand stroking his muscular brown back. "Sandwiches alfresco. How sweet."

"Wonder what they're up to now."

"Oh, don't start. They're not getting into any mischief. One would think *you* were never a child."

He grunted. "Selena? A child? She's the oldest twelve-year-old I ever met."

"An exceptionally bright child. A precocious child. I should think that dreary little Rob would bore her to tears. Cute, I grant you, but dumb as a box of rocks."

Gordon flung an arm around her shoulders. "Cute but dumb. Like me, you mean."

"Cute you are. Dumb you are not. Now drink your cocktail."

Gordon's darkly handsome face wore a speculative, brooding look. "I'm not so dumb I can't tell when they're up to something."

"Will you *stop?* What is it you think they're up to?"

"I wish I knew. It doesn't seem to bother you at all, what they did to that playhouse."

"It's Selena's playhouse, darling. What was I supposed to do, forbid her to paint it? It did look frightfully shabby, you know that."

"But using the same colors as the Valley house?"

"You find that sinister? Really, my pet, Selena loved the Valley house. She still misses it."

Gordon was not to be appeased. "Painting the same number as the Valley house on the door? Morbid, I'd call it."

Beryl's tone lost some of its lightness. "It doesn't bother me."

"Well, it bothers me—and she knows it. The way she dragged me down there the other day and told me to look in the window. She'd

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put her daddy's picture on that little pine table. And another thing. I don't think you should let her sleep down there."

Beryl howled. "Gordon, you're too much. There's no harm in her sleeping in the playhouse occasionally."

"You said she was precocious and that Rob kid is a sturdy little runt."

"Not *physically* precocious, you idiot. Tell me the truth. What's really bothering you? You're not still imagining things, I hope."

Gordon gave her a darkly portentous look. "*Am* I imagining things? Are you sure about that?"

The humor altogether faded from Beryl's tone now. "How many times must I tell you? She was asleep that night."

"Later, yes. You made sure of that. But earlier . . . "

"When she came out of her room? All she saw was a shadowy figure in the darkness."

"She saw what I was holding. She asked you if I was the *milkman,* for God's sake."

"She was half asleep," Beryl insisted.

"If she saw what I was carrying she could have seen my face," he retorted, not angrily but with a stubborn persistence.

"Nonsense. She would have said something after the fire, or certainly when you and I 'met'—presumably for the first time—a year later."

"If she was a normal kid, yes."

"There's nothing abnormal about Selena. Far from it. Honestly, Gordon, you're letting your imagination run wild. Or is it some kind of delayed guilt trip? You didn't mean to kill Marty. It was an accident. You weren't supposed to show up that night. Marty wasn't due back from Portland for another day. He heard you come in and thought you were a burglar. He had a gun, he might have killed you. And it was my idea, not yours, about the fire. How many times must I remind you of all this?"

Revealing an uncharacteristic subtlety of insight, Gordon said: "We should have gone off and got married without saying a word to Selena."

"What's our getting married got to do with anything?"

"You must be blind if you haven't noticed the change in her since we gave her the news."

Beryl shrugged. "Then I must be blind. Far as I can see, she acts no different."

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"On the surface, no. She hasn't *said* anything, it's the way she looks at me. The way she *smiles.*"

Beryl leaned over the rail, as charmed by what she saw as Gordon was disturbed. The miniature house among the bright flowers, the two children sitting on the green grass munching their sandwiches, the midday sun spreading a kind of golden varnish over the scene.

"Look at them, will you?" she said. "Did you ever see such a picture of innocence? Like an illustration in a storybook."

"Yeah, very pretty."

"Oh, do lighten up, darling. Exercise your body instead of your imagination while I make lunch. You'll love the avocado salad."

The following day was as warm as midsummer, the evening as delightfully balmy, with a gentle breeze coming off the lake. Ordinarily, Beryl would express no objection to Selena spending the night in the playhouse; she had dismissed Gordon's quibble as too fanciful to take seriously, yet she felt obliged to offer at least a token maternal resistance.

"Honey, I'm not sure it's wise for you to be alone at night down there."

"Don't be silly, Mother. I'm perfectly safe. There aren't any grizzly bears."

"I wasn't thinking of grizzly bears."

"Don't worry, there's a lock on the door. Besides, I have to sleep there tonight. Tonight's special."

"Special?"

Selena regarded her accusingly. "Don't you remember?"

"Remember what?"

"It was three years ago tonight. You know, when it happened. The fire and everything."

Beryl's hand rose to her lips. "Oh God, yes, you're right. Fancy your remembering."

Selena gave her mother a long, considering look. "Mother, dear, I remember *everything.*"

"Yes, well, maybe it's wiser not to remember some things."

"That all depends, doesn't it? Anyway, I want to spend tonight with Daddy."

Beryl made a faint choking sound. "With *Daddy?*"

"With his picture, I mean. Didn't Gordon tell you? I keep it right next to my cot in the playhouse."

"That's sweet."

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There were times when Beryl could not get out of her daughter's presence soon enough.

Selena did not go to bed at her usual time that night. There was no point; she dared not risk falling asleep. Instead she sat on the shore below the garden watching the lights in the houses across the lake go out, one by one, as the full moon sank lower among the stars. Selena sometimes wondered if she were some sort of freak, born without nerves; she marveled at the absence of any inner turmoil or excitement as the time grew near when she must return to the playhouse and do what had to be done. Her child-woman's imagination could foresee no possibility of her plan's failure, compounded though it was of a bizarre mixture of adolescent logic and adult deviousness.

When the hour seemed right, when the profound stillness of night was invaded by the twittering of those birds that herald the dawn's approach, Selena ended her vigil and ran lightly across the dew-soaked lawn to the playhouse, where she calmly proceeded to empty the contents of the milk jug over the floor and those few sticks of furniture in the single rectangular room. Then, outside the door, she lit the torch Rob had fashioned for her and tossed it into the room, quickly backing away and removing herself to a safe distance as the flames erupted.

She thought of Rob hidden somewhere in the patch of woodland separating the Winship property from the adjoining modest cottage. Selena was confident he would not disappoint her. He desperately wanted that ten-speed bike.

The firemen found her, seemingly in a state of shock, cowering at the edge of the lawn. They could make little sense of her incoherent babbling, which instantly dried up as Beryl and Gordon came racing down from the house. Beryl whisked Selena away, and after getting her tucked into bed found one of the firemen, apparently the one in charge, waiting for her on the terrace, where he was looking down on the smouldering ruins of the playhouse.

"She'll be all right," said Beryl, plainly in shock herself, or close to it. "I gave her a sleeping pill."

"Lucky kid, Mrs. Winship. She must have a guardian angel to have got out of there alive. Place must have gone up like a torch."

Beryl couldn't stop trembling. "It's too terrible. I can't bear to think about it. But who called in the alarm?"

"A neighbor. Didn't give his name."

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"But how did it start?" cried Beryl. "There's no electric power down there. No candles."

"One of our men did get a few words out of the girl. None of it made much sense. One thing, she kept asking if we'd got her daddy out."

Beryl's head jerked back as if he'd slapped her. "Her—? Oh, his picture. She meant his picture. She kept a picture of her father in the playhouse. I still can't understand how it could have happened."

"I'm afraid it didn't just happen, Mrs. Winship. The fire was deliberately set. We found a plastic milk jug on the grass a few feet from the structure. It reeked of gasoline."

Beryl seemed about to faint, reached out blindly for support. "Oh God."

"That's not all. Your daughter said something else. She said, 'I saw him. It was the milkman. I saw his face.' Does that make any sense to you?"

Beryl clutched her throat, as if to prevent a scream from reaching her lips. Then she said weakly, "No. No, it doesn't. No sense at all."

"Like I say, she was pretty incoherent. The inspector can question her later . . . and the police."

"Gordon's gone," announced Selena with the faintest of pussycat smiles. It was late afternoon. She and Rob were sitting on the shore tossing pebbles out into the lake.

"Gone for good?"

"Good is the word. Rode off into the sunset on his beloved Harley."

"What happened?"

"Let's just say Gordon decided it might be healthier somewhere else. You know what a health nut he is."

"Come on, Selena, tell me the truth."

Selena giggled. "The *truth,* dear boy, is not for your tender ears. I'll tell you this much. There'll be no more Gordons. Not ever. Beryl will be a good little mummy from now on."

"But what did you *tell* them, about the fire?"

Selena examined an especially interesting spotted pebble before tossing it into the water. "What I told *them?* Or what I told Beryl? What I told Beryl is that I woke up and looked out the playhouse window and saw this man standing on the lawn in the moonlight holding a milk jug. I said I got scared and crept out and ran down and hid by the lake before the playhouse went up in flames. I told her the man wore his hair in a pigtail. And then she called me a

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liar and a wicked girl and I had to remind her that the fire sparked—pardon the pun—certain *memories,* but not to worry. I wouldn't want to get *her* into trouble."

Rob's pleasant but somewhat dull features betrayed a mental struggle to comprehend all this, as if it were the plot of a story beyond his intellectual grasp. "What memories?"

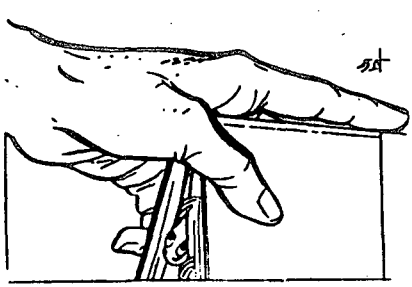
"None of your business. Anyway, we had a cozy little chat and I promised I'd tell *them* I must have been dreaming, and as for the milk jug on the lawn, we'd say you left it there after mowing. Remember that, in case you're asked. As I told Beryl, that'll be my story as long as I don't see that man with the pigtail again. Ever. Poor Beryl. She ran out of the room crying and shortly after that I looked out and saw Gordon strapping a knapsack on his Harley and off he went."

"You mean he got scared off just because he thought they'd believe you if you told them he set the fire? What a wimp."

"Well, there's a little more to it than that, but I'll spare you the sordid details. That's history. Oh, by the way, I've got a present for you."

She drew Beryl's check from her pocket and handed it to him. "Gee, great," he said with a beaming smile. "I wasn't sure you'd keep your end of the bargain."

"Thanks a lot. I told Beryl I'd promised to pay you for painting the playhouse. Oh yes, we had a most satisfactory talk. She's raising my allowance and agreed to see the family lawyer about making certain changes in the trust fund. Beryl's rather a dear—when she has to be. And I do have to protect her from rats like Gordon." Her smile, both pious and resolute, betrayed only the faintest shade of satire. "A daughter's duty, you know."



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Born in Buffalo, New York in 1903, Paul Horgan is the author of seventeen novels, four volumes of short stories, and several distinguished works of nonfiction. Although the author can by no means be described as a crime writer, the following is as fine an example of a crime story as one could hope to find. Tracings, *a book of recollections by Mr. Horgan, will be published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux in September of this year. . . .*

MUZZA

by PAUL HORGAN

How do we manage to love at all when there is so much hatred masquerading in love's name? I saw, if I did not understand, how this could be when I lost forever a friend whom I tried to rescue from peril. But a larger peril claimed him.

His name was John Burley. Nobody ever loved him enough to give him a natural nickname. Instead, he was the subject of mocking refrain.

"John, John, the dog-faced one," sang the other boys our age when they saw John and me playing together in our neighborhood. He was my next-door neighbor, and I didn't know there was anything really different about him until I saw him abused by other children.

Before we were old enough to go to school we owned the whole world all day long except for nap time after lunch. We played in the open grassy yards behind and between our houses, and when John was busy and dreaming with play, he was a good friend to have, and never made trouble. But when people noticed him, he became someone else, and now I know that his parents, and mine too, out of sympathy, wondered and wondered how things would be for him when the time came for him to go off to school like any other boy and make a place for himself among small strangers who might find his oddness a source of fun and power for themselves.

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In the last summer before schooltime, 1909, everyone heard the cry of "John, John, the dog-faced one," and even I, his friend, saw him newly. I would look at him with a blank face, until he would notice this, and then he would say crossly, with one of his impulsive, self-clutching movements,

"What's the matter, Richard, what's the matter, why are you looking crazy?"

"I'm not looking crazy. You're the one that's crazy."

For children pointed at him and sang, "Crazy, lazy, John's a daisy," and ran away.

Under their abuse, and my increasing wonderment, John showed a kind of daft good manners which should have induced pity and grace in his tormentors, but did not. He would pretend to be intensely preoccupied by delights and secrets from which the rest of us were excluded. He would count his fingers, nodding at the wrong total, and then put his thumbs against his thick lips and buzz against them with his furry voice, and look up at the sky, smacking his tongue, while other boys hooted and danced at him.

They were pitiably accurate when they called him the dog-faced one. He did look more like a dog than a boy. His pale hair was shaggy and could not be combed. His forehead was low, with a bony scowl that could not be changed. His nose was blunt, with its nostrils showing frontward. Hardly contained by his thick, shapeless lips, his teeth were long, white, and jumbled together. Of stocky build, he seemed always to be wearing a clever made-up costume to put on a monkey or a dog, instead of clothes like anybody else's. His parents bought him the best things to wear, but in a few minutes they were either torn or rubbed with dirt or scattered about somewhere.

"The poor dears," I heard my mother murmur over the Burley family.

"Yes," said my father, not thinking I might hear beyond what they were saying, "we are lucky. I can imagine no greater cross to bear."

"How do you suppose—" began my mother, but suddenly feeling my intent stare, he interrupted, with a glance my way, saying,

"Nobody ever knows how these cases happen. Watching them grow must be the hardest part."

What he meant was that it was sorrowful to see an abnormal child grow physically older but no older mentally.

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But Mr. and Mrs. Burley—Gail and Howard, as my parents called them—refused to admit to anyone else that their son John was in any way different from other boys. As the summer was spent, and the time to start school for the first time came around, their problem grew deeply troubling. Their friends wished they could help with advice, mostly in terms of advising that John be spared the ordeal of entering the rigid convention of a school where he would immediately be seen by all as a changeling, like some poor swineherd in a fairy story who once may have been a prince, but who would never be released from his spell.

The school—a private school run by an order of Catholic ladies founded in France—stood a few blocks from our street. The principal, who like each of her sisters wore a white shirtwaist with a high collar and starched cuffs and a long dark blue skirt, requested particularly that new pupils should come the first day without their parents. Everyone would be well-looked-after. The pupils would be put to tasks which would drive diffidence and homesickness out the window. My mother said to me as she made me lift my chin so that she could tie my Windsor tie properly over the stiff slopes of my Buster Brown collar, while I looked into her deep, clear, blue eyes, and wondered how to say that I would not go to school that day or any other,

"Richard, John's mother thinks it would be so nice if you and he walked to school together."

"I don't want to."

I did not mean that I did not want to walk with John, I meant that I did not want to go to school.

"That's not very kind. He's your friend."

"I know it."

"I have told his mother you would go with him."

Childhood was a prison whose bars were decisions made by others. Numbed into submission, I took my mother's goodbye kiss staring at nothing, eaten within by fears of the unknown which awaited us all that day.

"Now skip," said my mother, winking both her eyes rapidly, to disguise the start of tears at losing me to another stage of life. She wore a small gold fleur-de-lis pin on her breast from which depended a tiny enameled watch. I gazed at this and nodded solemnly, but did not move. With wonderful executive tact she felt that I was about to make a fatally rebellious declaration, and so she touched the

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watch, turning its face around, and said, as though I must be concerned only with promptness,

"Yes, yes, Richard, you are right, we must think of the time, you mustn't be late your first day."

I was propelled then to the Burleys' house next door, where John and his mother were waiting for me in their front hall, which was always filled with magic light from the cut-glass panes in bright colors flanking their front door.

Mrs. Burley held me by the shoulders for a moment, trying to tell me something without saying it.

"Richard," she said, and then paused.

She looked deep into my eyes until I dropped my gaze. I looked at the rest of her face, and then at her bosom, wondering what was down there in that shadow where two rounded places of flesh rolled frankly together. Something about her personality led people to use her full name when they referred to her even idly—"Gail Burley"—and even I felt power within her.

Her husband had nothing like her strength. He was a small grey man with thin hair combed flat across his almost bald skull. The way his pince-nez pulled at the skin between his eyes gave him a look of permanent headache. Always hurried and impatient, he seemed to have no notice for children like me, or his own son, and all I ever heard about him was that he "gave Gail Burley anything she asked for" and "worked his fingers to the bone" doing so, as president of a marine engine company with a factory on the lakefront of our city of Dorchester in upstate New York.

Gail Burley—and I cannot say how much of her attitude arose from her sense of disaster in the kind of child she had borne—seemed to exist in a state of general exasperation. A reddish blond, with skin so pale that it glowed like pearl, she was referred to as a great beauty. Across the bridge of her nose and about her eyelids and just under her eyes there were scatterings of little gold freckles which oddly yet powerfully reinforced her air of being irked by everything.

She often exhaled slowly and with compression, and said "Gosh," a slang word which was just coming in in her circle, which she pronounced "Garsh." Depending on her mood, she could make it into the expression of ultimate disgust or mild amusement. The white skin under her eyes went whiter when she was cross or angry, and then a dry hot light came into her hazel eyes. She seemed a large woman to me, but I don't suppose she was—merely slow, challenging, and annoyed in the way she moved, with a flowing governed

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grace that was like a comment on all that was intolerable. At any moment she would exhale in audible distaste for the circumstances of her world. Compressing her lips, which she never rouged, she would ray her pale glance upward, across, aside, to express her search for the smallest mitigation, the simplest endurable fact or object of life. The result of these airs and tones of her habit was that in those rare moments when she was pleased, her expression of happiness came through like one of pain.

"Richard," she said, holding me by the shoulders and looking into my face to discover what her son John was about to confront in the world of small schoolchildren.

"Yes, Mrs. Burley."

She looked at John, who was waiting to go.

He had his red and black plaid japanned collapsible tin lunch box all nicely secured with a web strap, and he made his buzzing noise of pleasure at the idea of doing something so new as going to school. Because he showed no apprehension over what would seem like an ordeal to another boy, she let forth one of her breaths of disgust. She had dressed him in a starched collar like mine which extended over the smart lapels of his beautiful blue suit, with its Norfolk jacket. His socks were well pulled up and his shoes were shined. She looked at me again, trying to say what she could not. Her white face with its flecks of fixed displeasure slowly took on a pleading smile. She squeezed my shoulders a little, hoping I would understand, even at my age, how John would need someone to look out for him, protect him, suffer him, since he was a child of such condition as she could not bring herself to admit. Her plea was resolved into a miniature of the principle of bribery by which her life was governed—even, I now think, to the terms on which Howard Burley obtained even her smallest favors.

"Richard," she said, "when you and John come home after school"—and she pressed those words to show that I must bring him home—"I will have a nice surprise waiting for you both."

John became agitated at this, jumping about, and demanding,

"What is it, Muzza, what is it?"

She gave one of her breaths.

"John, John, be quiet. Garsh. I can't even say anything without getting you all excited."

For my benefit she smiled, but the gold flecks under her eyes showed as angry dark spots, and the restrained power of her dislike of John was so great that he was cowed. He put his hands to his

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groin to comfort himself and said, using his word for what he always found there, "Peanut."

At this his mother became openly furious at him.

"John! Stop that! How many times have I told you that isn't nice. Richard doesn't do it. Dr. Grauer has told you what will happen if you keep doing it. Stop it!"

She bent over to slap at his hands and he lunged back. Losing his balance, he fell, and I heard his head go crack on the hardwood floor of the hall where the morning light made pools of jewel colors through the glass panels. He began to cry in a long, burry, high wail. His mother picked him up and he hung like a rag doll in her outraged grasp. The day was already in ruins, and he had not even gone off to school. The scene was one of hundreds like it which made up the life of that mother and that son. I was swept by shame at seeing it.

"Now stop that ridiculous caterwauling," she said. "Richard is waiting to take you to school. Do you want him to think you are a crybaby?"

John occasionally made startling remarks, which brought a leap of hope that his understanding might not be so deficient as everyone believed.

"I *am* a crybaby," he said, burying his misery-mottled face in the crook of his arm.

A sudden lift of pity in his mother made her kneel down and gently enfold him in her arms. With her eyes shut, she gave her love to the imaginary son, handsome and healthy, whom she longed for even as she held the real John. It was enough to console him. He flung his arms around her and hugged her like a bear cub, all fur and clumsiness and creature longing.

"Muzza, Muzza," he said against her cheek.

She set him off.

"*Now* can you go to school?" she asked in a playfully reasonable voice.

John's states of feeling were swift in their changes. He began to smack his lips, softly indicating that he was in a state of pleasure.

"Then go along, both of you," said his mother.

She saw us out the door and down the walk. Curiously enough, the self-sorrowing lump in my throat went away as I watched the scene between John and his mother. Things seemed so much worse with the Burleys than with me and my start in school.

* * *

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I led John off at a smart pace, running sometimes, and sometimes walking importantly with short busy steps. We paused only once, and that was to look in the window at a little candy and news shop a block from the school, where with warm, damp pennies it was possible to buy sticky rolls of chocolate candy, or—even better—stamp-sized films which when exposed to light darkened in shades of red to reveal such subjects as the battleship *New York* or the Woolworth Building or the Washington Monument.

John always had more money than I.

"Let's get some," he proposed.

"No. After school," I replied. "We will be late if we stop and we will catch the dickens."

"Catch the dickens," he said, and began to run away ahead of me. I overtook him and we entered the main door of the school—it was a red brick building with a portico of white pillars veiled in vines—and once in the dark corridors with their wood-ribbed walls, we seemed to lose ourselves to become small pieces of drifting material that were carried along to our classrooms by a tide of children. Boys went separate from girls. John and I were finally directed to a room containing twenty boys in the first grade, presided over by Miss Mendtzy.

She met us at the door and without speaking, but sustaining a kindly smile, sent us with a strong thin finger on our shoulders along the aisles where we would find our desks. We gave her wary glances to see what she was like. She had a narrow little face above a bird's body. Her hair was like short grey feathers. Before her large, steady, pale eyes she wore a pair of nose glasses that trembled in response to her quivering nerves and sent a rippling line of light along the gold chain that attached her glasses to a small gold spring spool pinned to her shirtwaist.

John and I were at desks side by side. When all the room was filled, Miss Mendtzy closed the door, and our hearts sank. There we were, in jail. She moved trimly to her platform. Her slim feet in black, high-buttoned shoes looked like feet in a newspaper advertisement because she stood them at such polite angles to each other. On her desk she had placed a vase of flowers with a great silk bow to give a festive air to the opening day. Touching the blossoms with a flourish of artistic delicacy, she launched into a pleasant little speech. Everyone sat quietly out of strangeness while she said,

"Now I want all of my new first-graders to come up here one by one, beginning with this aisle on my left"—she showed where in a

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gesture of bloodless grace—"and shake hands with me and tell me their names, for we are going to be working together for months and years, as I will be your homeroom teacher until the sixth grade. Think of it! Quite like a family! And so we are going to become great friends, and we must know each other well. Miss Mendtzy is ready to love each and every one of you, and she hopes each and every one of you will learn to love her. We are going to get along splendidly together, if everybody is polite and works hard and remembers that he is not the only boy in this world or in this school or in this room, but that he is a boy among other boys, to whom he must show respect, even while playing. Now, shall we start here, with this boy at the front of the first row?"

One by one we went to her platform, stepped up on it, shook hands, spoke our names, received a bright, lens-quivered smile and deep look into our eyes, and then were sent on across her little stage and down the other side and back to our seats. Some among us swaggered, others went rapidly and shyly, hiding from such a public world, one or two winked on the final trip up the aisles, and all felt some thumping at the heart of dread followed by pride as we went and returned.

There was no incident until John's turn came. When it did, he would not rise and go forward.

"Come," said Miss Mendtzy, beckoning over her desk and twinkling with her chained glasses. "We are waiting for the next boy."

I leaned over to John and whispered,

"It's your turn, John. Go on. Go on."

He went lower in his seat and began to buzz his lips against his thumbs, terrified of rising before a crowd of small strangers, who were now beginning to nudge each other and whisper excitedly at the diversion. I heard someone whisper, "John, John, the dog-faced one," and I could not tell whether John heard it. But, a professional, Miss Mendtzy heard it. She smartly whacked her ruler on the flat of her desk. It was like a nice pistol shot. Silence fell.

She put on her face a look that we all knew well at home—that look of aloof, pained regret at unseemly behavior.

"I must say I am surprised," she said quietly, "that some of us are not polite enough to sit silently when we see someone in a fit of shyness. Some of the finest people I know are shy at times. I have been told that our bishop, that humble, great man, is shy himself when he has to meet people personally. Now I am going down from

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my platform and down the aisle and"—she glanced at her seating plan of the classroom—"I am going to bring John Burley up here myself as my guest and help him over his shyness, and the only way to do that is by helping him to do the same things everybody else has done. So."

She went to John and took his hand and led him to the platform and stood him where each of us had stood, facing her, in profile to the rest of the room. Speaking as though he had just come there by his own will, she said,

"Good morning, John. I am Miss Mendtzy. We are pleased that you are with us," first giving us a sidelong glare to command our agreement, and then, like a lady, holding forth her hand to John, with a slightly arched wrist and drooping fingers.

John put his hands behind him and buzzed his lips and looked out the window.

"John?"

"John, John, the dog-faced one," again said an unplaceable voice in the rear of the classroom, softly but distinctly.

"Who said that!" demanded Miss Mendtzy, going pink and trembling until her lenses shimmered. The very first day of school, she seemed to say, and already there was an unfortunate incident. "I simply will not have bad manners in my room, and I simply will not have one of my boys treated like this. Whoever said that is to stand up and apologize instantly. I think I know who it was"—but clearly she did not—"and if he apologizes now and promises never, never to do such a rude thing again, we shall all be friends again as we want to be. Well? I am waiting."

The silence and the tension grew and grew.

John stood with head hanging. I saw his hands twitching behind his back. He was trying not to clasp them over himself in front.

"One more minute," declared Miss Mendtzy, "and then I will do something you will all be very sorry for."

Silence, but for a clock ticking on the wall above her blackboard.

John could not bear it. Moving as fast as a cat, he threw himself forward to Miss Mendtzy's desk and swept her vase of flowers to the floor where it shattered and spilled.

All the boys broke into hoots and pounded their hinged desktops upon their desks, making such a clamor that in a moment the door was majestically opened and the principal, always called Madame de St. Étienne, who came from nobility in France, heavily entered the room. Even as she arrived, someone in the rear of the room,

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carried on by the momentum of events, called out, "Crazy, lazy, John's a daisy."

The principal was a monument of authority. Above her heavy pink face with its ice-blue eyes rose a silvery pompadour like a wave breaking back from a headland. Her bosom was immense in her starched shirtwaist. Over it she wore a long gold chain which fell like a maiden waterfall into space below her bust and ended in a loop at her waist where she tucked a large gold watch. Her dark skirt went straight down in front, for she had to lean continuously forward, we thought, if the vast weight and size behind her were not to topple her over backward.

She now glared at Miss Mendtzy with frigid reproach at the breach of discipline in her classroom loud enough to be heard down the hall, and then faced us all, saying in a voice like pieces of broken glass scraped together at the edges,

"Children, you will rise when the principal enters the classroom."

She clapped her hands once and we rose, scared and ashamed.

"Now who is this?" she demanded, turning to the tableau at the teacher's platform.

"This is John Burley, Madame," replied Miss Mendtzy, and got no further, for John, seeing the open door, bolted for the hall and freedom.

Madame de St. Étienne gave another queenly, destructive look at Miss Mendtzy, and said,

"Pray continue with the exercises, Miss Mendtzy."

She then left the room, moving as though on silent casters, for her skirt swept the floor all about her short, light steps, amazing in a woman so heavy and so enraged.

Burning with mortification, Miss Mendtzy began our first lesson, which was an exercise in neatness—the care of our pencil boxes and schoolbooks. There was a happy material interest in this, for the pencils were all new and smelled of cedar, and we went in turn to sharpen them at the teacher's desk. Our erasers—promises of foreordained smudges of error—showed a tiny diamondlike glisten if we held them in a certain way to the light of the window. If we chewed upon them, little gritty particles deliciously repelled our teeth. Our schoolbooks cracked sweetly when we opened them, and the large, clear, black type on the pages held mystery and invitation. We became absorbed in toys which were suddenly now something more than toys, and our cheeks grew hot, and we were happy, and we forgot to want to go to the bathroom. I was hardly aware of it

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when the door opened again before Madame de St. Étienne. Late, but earnestly, we scrambled to our feet, as she said,

"Which is Richard—?" giving my full name.

"Pray come with me, Richard," she ordered, ignoring Miss Mendtzy entirely. "Bring your boxes and books."

A stutter of conjecture went along the aisles at this, which Madame de St. Étienne, gliding on her way to the door, suppressed by pausing and staring above the heads of everyone as though she could not believe her ears. Quiet fell, and in quiet, with my heart beating, I followed her out to the hallway. She shut the door and turned me with a finger to walk ahead of her to her office at the entranceway inside the pillared portico. I wanted to ask what I had done to be singled out for her notice, which could only, I thought, lead to punishment.

But it appeared that she had enlisted me as an assistant. In her office, John was waiting, under guard of the principal's secretary. He was sitting on a cane chair holding a glass of water, half full.

"Finish it, John," commanded Madame.

"I don't like it," he said.

"Hot water to drink is the best thing for anyone who is upset," she answered. "It is the remedy we always give. Finish it."

Raising a humble wail, he drank the rest of the hot water, spilling much of it down on his chin, his Windsor tie, his starched collar.

"You are John's friend?" she asked me.

"Yes."

"Who are his other friends?"

"I don't know."

"Has he none, then?"

"I don't think so."

John watched my face, then the principal's, turning his head with jerky interest and rubbing his furry hair with his knuckles in pleasure at being the subject of interest.

"You brought him to school?"

"Yes."

"Yes, *Madame.*"

"Yes, Madame."

"And you will take him home?"

"Yes, Madame. After school."

"I have spoken on the telephone with his mother, to arrange for him to go home. She prefers not to have him come home until the end of school after lunch. Until then, I will ask you to stay here in

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my office with him. You will both eat your lunches here and I will see that you are not disturbed. Tomorrow you will be able to return to your classroom."

"With John?"

"No. John will not be with us after today."

John nodded brightly at this. Evidently the principal had given an ultimatum to Mrs. Burley over the telephone. I can imagine the terms of it—careful avoidance of the words abnormal, special case, impossible to measure up to the progress of other boys his age, and such. With arctic, polite finality, Madame de St. Étienne would have read John out of the human society where his years put him but where his retarded mind and disordered nerves, so clearly announced by his rough, doglike appearance, must exclude him. Gail Burley's despair can be felt. How could she ever again pretend even to herself that her child, if only thrown into life, would make his way like anyone else? How could she love anything in the world if she could not love the son who was mismade in her womb? What a bitter affront it was to her famous good looks of face and body, her hard brightness of mind, her firm ability to govern everything else that made up her life, if she must be responsible for such a creature as John. How to face a lifetime of exasperated pity for him? How to disguise forever the humiliation which she must feel? The daily effort of disguising it would cost her all her confident beauty in the end.

"Why don't we go home now?" I asked.

"John's mother thinks it would look better if he simply came home like the other children when school is dismissed this afternoon."

Yes, for if they saw him come earlier, people would say once again what she knew they were always saying about John. I knew well enough the kind of thing, from hearing my own father and mother talk kindly and sadly about my playmate.

Let him come home after school, like everyone else, and tomorrow, why, then, tomorrow, Gail Burley could simply say with a shrug and a speckled smile that she and Howard didn't think it was really just the school for John. There was something about those teachers, neither quite nuns, nor quite ordinary women, which was unsettling. The Burleys would look around, and meantime, John could be tutored at home, as Gail herself had been one winter when she had gone as a little girl with her parents to White Sulphur Springs. Leaving the school could be made, with a little languid ingenuity, to seem like a repudiation by her, for reasons she would be too polite

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to elaborate upon for parents of other children still attending it.

The day passed slowly in the principal's office. At eleven o'clock there was a fire drill, set off by a great alarm gong which banged slowly and loudly in the hall just above the office door. The door was kept closed upon us, but we could hear the rumble and slide of the classes as they took their appointed ways out of the building to the shaded playgrounds outside.

"I want to go, I want to go!" cried John at the window. "Everybody is there!"

"No," said Madame de St. Étienne, turning like an engine in her swivel chair, "we will remain here. They will presently return."

John began to cry.

The principal looked to me to manage him and calmly turned back to the work on her desk, placing a pince-nez upon the high bridge of her thin nose with a sweep of her arm which was forced to travel a grand arc to bypass her bosom.

But at last, when the clock in the office showed twenty-five minutes past two, she said,

"Now, John, and now, Richard, you may take your things and go home. School is dismissed at half-past two. Perhaps it would be prudent for you to leave a little before the other boys. You will go straight home."

"Yes, Madame."

She gave us each her hand. To John she said,

"May God bless you, my poor little one."

Her words and her manner sent a chill down my belly.

But in a moment we were in the open air of the autumn day, where a cold wind off the lake was spinning leaves from the trees along the street. John capered happily along and when we reached the candy store, he remembered how we would stop there. I wondered if stopping there would violate our orders to go "straight home," but the store was on the way, and we went in.

John enjoyed shopping. He put his stubby finger with its quick-bitten nail on the glass of the candy counter, pointing to first one then another confection, and every time he made up his mind he changed it, until the proprietor, an old man with a bent back in a dirty grey cardigan, sighed and looked over his shoulder at his wife, who sat in the doorway to their back room. His glance and her return of it plainly spoke of John's idiocy.

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"There!" said John finally, aiming his finger and his hunger at a candy slice of banana, cut the long way, and tasting, I knew, of cotton mixed with gun oil. The candy banana was white in the center with edges stained orange and yellow.

I moved on to the counter where you could buy the magic photographic plates which showed nothing until you exposed them to the light. I wanted to buy one, but I had no money. John came beside me and said,

"Richard, I'll get you one."

"Oh no."

"Oh yes, I'll get you two."

He put down four pennies to pay for two prints and the storekeeper gave me the box to choose my prints. On the edge of each little plate was the name of its subject. I chose the liner *Mauretania* and Buckingham Palace.

"Here," I said to John, offering him one of them. "You keep one."

He put his hands behind his back and blew his tongue at me between his thick lips.

"All right, then, thanks, we have to go home now. Come on, John," I said.

Eating his banana, John was compliant. We came out of the store and went to the corner where we turned into our street. Our houses were a block and a half away. We could just see them. Under the billowing trees and the cool autumn light they looked asleep. They called to me. I wanted suddenly to be home.

"Let's run, John," I said.

We began to run, but we got no farther than a large hedge which ran up the driveway of the second house from the corner.

It was a great house, with a large garage in back, and a deep lawn. I knew the brothers who lived there. Their name was Grandville. They were a year or two older and very self-important because of their family automobiles and their electric train system, which occupied the whole top floor of their house.

They now jumped out from behind the hedge. With them were three other boys. They had all just come home from school. While we had idled in the candy store, they had gone by to wait for us.

"John, John, the dog-faced one!" they called and took John and dragged him up the driveway toward the garage in the windy, empty neighborhood. "Crazy, lazy, John's a daisy," they chanted, and I ran along yelling,

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"Let us go, let us go!"

"Shut up, or we'll get you too," cried one of the brothers.

"Richie!" moaned John, "Richie!"

The terror in his blurry voice was like that in a nightmare when you must scream and cannot make a sound. His face was belly-white and his eyes were staring at me. I was his protector. I would save him.

"Richie! Richie!"

But I could do nothing against the mob of five, but only run along calling to them to "let go of us"—for I felt just as much captive as John, whom they dragged by arms and legs. He went heavy and limp. They hauled him through the chauffeur's door—a narrow one beside the big car doors, which were closed—and shut the door after us all. The center of the garage was empty, for the big Pierce-Arrow limousine was out, bearing Mrs. Grandville somewhere on a chauffeur-driven errand.

"Put him there!" yelled one of the brothers.

Four boys held John on the cement floor by the drain grille while the other brother went to the wall, uncoiled a hose, and turned the spigot. The hose leaped alive with a thrust of water.

"Now let go and get back or you'll all get wet," called the Grandville boy. As the others scampered back he turned the powerful blow of the hose water on John. It knocked him down. He shut his eyes and turned his blind face to the roof. His shapeless mouth fell open in a silent cry. Still clutching his candy banana, he brought it to his mouth in delayed memory of what it was for, and what had been a delight was now a sorrowful and profitless hunger for comfort in misery.

"Get up, dogface," yelled one of the boys.

Obediently John got up, keeping his eyes closed, suffering all that must come to him. The hose column toppled him over again. Striking his face, blows of water knocked his head about until it seemed it must fly apart.

"I know!" cried an excited and joyful young voice. "Let's get his clo'es off!"

There was general glee at this idea. The hose was put away for the moment, and everyone seized John and tore at his clothes. He made his soundless wail with open mouth and I thought he shaped my name again.

When he was naked they ordered him to stand again, and he did so, trying to protect his modesty with his thick hands. They hit him

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with the hose again and buffeted him like a puppet. The hose water made him spin and slide on the oily floor. The noise was doubled by echoes from the peaked high roof of the garage.

Nobody thought of me.

I backed to the door and opened it and ran away. On the concrete driveway was a tricycle belonging to the younger Grandville. I mounted it and rode off as fast as I could. My chest was ready to break open under my hard breathing. My knees rose and fell like pistons. My face was streaming with tears of rage at John's ordeal and the disgrace of my helplessness before it. I rode to John's house and threw myself up the front steps, but before I could attack the door it was opened to me. Gail Burley was watching for us and when she saw me alone in gasping disorder, she cried,

"Why, Richard! What's the matter! Where's John!"

At first I could only point, so I took her hand and tugged at her to come with me. It was proof of the passion and power I felt at the moment that without more questioning she came. I remounted the tricycle and led her up the street to the Grandvilles'. In a little while as I went I was able to tell her what was happening.

When she understood, she increased her stride. She became magnificent in outrage. Her hazel eyes darkened to deep topaz and her reddish golden hair seemed to spring forward into the wind. She was like a famous ship, dividing the elements as she went.

"Oh! Those horrid, cruel little beasts!" she exclaimed. "Oh! What I would do to them—and Richard, you are an absolute *darrling* to get away and come for me. Oh! That poor John!"

We hurried up the driveway. The game was still going on. We could hear cries and the hiss of the hose. Gail Burley strode to the door and threw it open. She saw her son pinned against the far brick wall by the long pole of the spray. He tried to turn his face from side to side to avoid its impact. It swept down his white soft body and he continually tried to cover himself with his hands. Nonresistant, he accepted all that came to him. His eyes were still closed and his mouth was still open.

Stepping with baleful elegance across the puddles of the floor, Gail Burley threw aside the boys who were dancing at the spectacle, and came to the Grandville brother with the hose. She astounded him. In his ecstatic possession, he had heard no one arrive. She seized the hose and with a gesture commanded him to turn off the water, which he did. She dropped the hose and went to John and

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took him dripping and blue with cold into her arms. He fell inert against her, letting his hands dangle as she hugged him. But he made a word at last.

"Muzza," he said thickly, "oh, Muzza, Muzza."

"John-John," she said, holding his wet head against the hollow of her lovely neck and shoulder. "It's all right, It's all right. Muzza is here. Poor John-John."

The boys were now frightened. The oldest said,

"We were only trying to have some fun, Mrs. Burley."

"Go to the house," she commanded in her flattest tone, which held promises of punishment for all as soon as she could inform their parents, "and bring a big towel and a blanket. —Richard, you might throw together John's things and bring them along."

She was obeyed soberly and quickly. In a few minutes she and I were taking John home. He was huddled inside a doubled blanket. He was shivering. His teeth chattered.

"Where's my banana?" he managed to say.

"Oh, never mind," said his mother. "We can get you another banana. What were you doing with a banana anyway?"

"It was a candy one," I explained.

"I see."

Her thoughts were falling into order after the disturbance of her feelings by the cruelty she had come to halt.

My perceptions of what followed were at the time necessarily shallow, but they were, I am sure, essentially correct.

"Those wretches!" exclaimed Gail Burley, leading John by the hand while I trotted alongside. "What would we ever have done without Richard? You are a true friend, Richard! —Oh!" she said, at the memory of what she had seen. And then, as John stumbled because she was walking so fast and his blanket folds were so awkward to hold about himself, she jerked his hand and said, "Stop dragging your feet, John! Why can't you walk like anybody else! Here! Pull up and keep up with me!"

At her suddenly cold voice, he went limp and would have fallen softly, like a dropped teddy bear, to the sidewalk. But she dragged him up and said with her teeth almost closed,

"John Burley, do you hear me? Get up and come with me. If you do not, your father will give you the whaling of your life when he comes home tonight!"

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"No, Muzza, no, Muzza," muttered John at the memories that this threat called alive. He got to his feet and began half-running along beside her, dragging his borrowed blanket, which looked like the robe of a pygmy king in flight.

I was chilled by the change in Mrs. Burley. Her loving rage was gone and in its place was a fury of exasperation. She blinked away angry tears. With no thought of how fast John could run along with her, she pulled and jerked at him all the way home, while her face told us after all that she was bitterly ashamed of him.

For at last she took the world's view of her son. Represented by his own kind, other children, the world had repudiated him. Much as she hated the cruelty of the Grandvilles and their friends, sore as her heart was at what her son had suffered through them, she knew they were society, even if it was shown at its most savage. It was the determining attitude of the others that mattered. She had seen it clearly. Her heart broke in half. One half was charged with love and pity as it defied the mocking world which allowed no published lapse from its notion of a finally unrealizable norm. The other half was pierced by fragments of her pride. How could it happen to *her* that *her* child could be made sport of as a little animal monster? Gail Burley was to be treated better than that.

"John?" she sang out in warning as John stumbled again. "You heard what I said?"

Her cheeks, usually pale, were now flushed darkly. I was afraid of her. She seemed ready to treat John just as the boys had treated him. Was she on the side of his tormentors? Their judgments persuaded her even as she rescued her child. She longed for him both to live—and to die. Cold desire rose up in her. If only she knew some way to save this poor child in the future from the abuse and the uselessness which were all that life seemed to offer him. How could she spare John and herself long lifetimes of baffled sorrow? She made him dance along faster than he could, for being such a creature that others mocked and tortured him, at the expense of her pride.

When we reached her house, she said,

"Richard, you are an angel. Please drop John's wet things in the butler's pantry. I am going to take him upstairs to bed. He is having a chill. I'll never be able to thank you enough. Your afterschool surprise is on the hall table, an almond chocolate bar. Come over and see John later."

* * *

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But that evening just before my nursery supper when I went to show John the developed prints of the *Mauretania* and Buckingham Palace, his father met me in the living room and said that John was ill—his chill had gone worse. His mother was upstairs with him, and I must not go up.

"Well, Richard," said Howard Burley, "God only knows what they would have done to John if you hadn't come to get his mother. They will catch it, never fear. I have talked to their fathers."

I had been feeling all afternoon a mixture of guilt and fright for having snitched on the boys. Now I was sure they would avenge themselves on me. Something of this must have shown in my face.

"Never fear," said Mr. Burley. "Their fathers will see to it that nothing happens to you. Come over and see John tomorrow."

But the next day they said that John was really ill with grippe.

"Did they send for Dr. Grauer?" asked my mother.

"I don't know," I said.

He was our doctor, too, and we would have known his car if he had come to attend to John. But all day nobody came, and the next day, John was worse, and my mother said to my father, with glances that recalled my presence to him, which must require elliptical conversation,

"Grippe sometimes goes into pneumonia, you know."

"Yes, I know," replied my father. "But they know how to treat these things."

"Yes, I know, but sometimes something is needed beyond just home remedies."

"Then Grauer has not yet—?"

"No, not today, either."

"That is odd. Perhaps he isn't so sick as we think."

"Oh, I think so. I talked to Gail today. She is frantic."

"Well."

"But she says she knows what to do. They are doing everything, she says. Everything possible."

"I am sure they are. —Sometimes I can't help thinking that it might be better all around if—"

"Yes, I have too," said my mother hastily, indicating me again. "But of course it must only be God's will."

My father sighed.

I knew exactly what they were talking about, though they thought I didn't.

* * *

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On the third day, John Burley died. My mother told me the news when I reached home after school. She winked both eyes at me as she always did in extremes of feeling. She knelt down and enfolded me. Her lovely heart-shaped face was an image of pity. She knew I knew nothing of death, but some feeling of death came through to me from the intensity of color in her blue eyes. The power of her feeling upset me, and I swallowed as if I were sick when she said,

"Richard, my darling, our dear, poor, little John died this morning. His chill grew worse and worse and finally turned into pneumonia. They have already taken him away. His mother wanted me to tell you. She loves you for what you tried to do for him."

"Then he's gone?"

"Yes, my dearie, you will never be able to see him again. That is what death means."

I was sobered by these remarks, but I did not weep. I was consumed with wonder, though I was not sure what I wondered about.

There was no funeral. Burial, as they said, was private. I missed John, but I was busy at school, where I was cautious with the Grandvilles and the others until enough days passed after the punishments they had received to assure me that I was safe from their reprisals. Perhaps they wanted to forget that they had given away death in heedless play. Howard Burley went to the office quite as usual. His wife stayed home and saw no one for a while.

"I cannot help wondering," said my mother, "why she never called Dr. Grauer."

"Hush," said my father. "Don't dwell on such things."

But I dwelled on them now and then. They were part of my knowledge on the day when Gail Burley asked my mother to send me to see her after school.

"Mrs. Burley has some things of John's that she wants to give you. You were his best friend."

I knew all his toys. Some of them were glorious. I saw them all in my mind again. I went gladly to see his mother.

The housemaid let me in and sent me upstairs to Mrs. Burley's sitting room. She was reclining against many lacy pillows on a chaise longue in the bay window. She was paler than ever, and perhaps thinner, and there was a new note in her voice which made her seem like a stranger—a huskiness which reflected lowered vitality. She embraced me and said,

"Do you miss John?"

"Yes."

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"Poor little John."

Her hazel eyes were blurred for a moment and she looked away out the window into the rustling treetops of autumn, as though to conceal both emotion and knowledge from me. "Oh, my God," I heard her say softly. Then she let forth one of her controlled breaths, annoyed at her own weakness as it lay embedded in the general condition of the world, and said with revived strength,

"Well, Richard, let's be sensible. Come and pick out the toys you want in John's nursery. What you don't take I am going to send to Father Raker's orphanage."

She led me along the upstairs hall to John's room. His toys were laid out in rows, some on the window seat, the rest on the floor.

"I suppose I could say that you should just take them all," she said with one of her unwilling smiles, "but I think that would be selfish of us both. Go ahead and pick."

With the swift judgment of the expert, I chose a beautiful set of Pullman cars for my electric train, which had the same track as John's, and a power boat with mahogany cabin and real glass portholes draped in green velvet curtains, and a battalion of lead soldiers with red coats and black busbies and white cross belts tumbled together in their box who could be set smartly on parade, and a set of watercolor paints, and a blackboard on its own easel with a box of colored chalks. These, and so much else in the room, spoke of attempts to reward John for what he was not—and for what they were not, the parents, too. I looked up at his mother. She was watching me as if never to let me go.

"Your cheeks are so flushed," she said, "and it is adorable the way the light makes a gold ring on your hair when you bend down. Richard, come here."

She took me in her hungry arms. I felt how she trembled. There was much to make her tremble.

"Do you want anything else?" she asked, again becoming sensible, as she would have said. Her concealed intensity made me lose mine.

"No, thank you, Mrs. Burley."

"Well, you can take your new toys home whenever you like. You can't carry them all at once."

"I'll take the boat now," I said.

"All right. Garsh, it's big, isn't it. John loved to sail it when we went to Narragansett."

She took me downstairs to the door. There she lingered. She wanted to say something. She could have said it to an adult. How

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could she say it to me? Yet most grown people spoke to me as if I were far older than my years. Leaning her back against the door, with her hands behind her on the doorknob and with her face turned upward so that I saw her classical white throat and the curve of her cheek until it was lost in the golden shadows of her eye, she said,

"Richard, I wonder if you would ever understand—you knew, didn't you, surely, that our poor little John was not like other children?"

"Sometimes, yes."

"His father and I suffered for him, seeing how hard it was for him with the other children; and then we thought of how it would have to be when he grew up—do you know?"

I nodded, though I did not know, really.

"We are heartbroken to lose him, you must know that. He was all we had. But do you know, we sometimes wonder if it is better that God took him, even if we had to lose him. Do you know?"

She looked down at me as if to complete her thought through her golden piercing gaze. When she saw the look of horror on my face, she caught her breath. Conventional, like all children, I was amazed that anyone should be glad of death, if that meant not seeing someone ever again.

"Oh, Richard, don't judge us yet for feeling that way. When you grow up and see more of what life does to those who cannot meet it, you will understand." She was obsessed. Without naming it, she must speak of the weight on her heart, even if only to me, a first-grader in school. In my ignorance, perhaps I might be the only safe one in whom to confide. "Garsh, when you see cripples trying to get along, and sick people who can never get well, you wonder why they can't be spared and just die."

The appalling truth was gathering in me. I stared at her while she continued,

"John was always frail, and when those horrid boys turned on him and he caught that chill and it went into pneumonia, his father and I did everything to save him, but it was not enough. We had to see him go."

Clutching John's beautiful power boat in both arms, I cowered a little away from her and said,

"You never sent for a doctor, though."

A sharp silence cut its way between us. She put one hand on her breast and held herself. At last she said in a dry, bitter voice,

"Is that what is being said, then?"

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"Dr. Grauer always comes when I am sick."

She put her hand to her mouth. Her eyes were afire like those of a trapped cat.

"Richard," she whispered against her fingers, "what are you thinking? Don't you believe we loved John?"

I said, inevitably,

"Did you have him die?"

At this she flew into a golden, speckled fury. She reached for me to chastise me, but I eluded her. I was excited by her and also frightened. Her eyes blazed with shafted light. I managed to dance away beyond her reach, but I was encumbered by the beautiful power cruiser in my arms. I let it crash to the floor. I heard its glass break. Escape and safety meant more to me just then than possession of the wonderful boat. I knew the house. I ran down the hall to the kitchen and out the back door to my own yard and home, out of breath, frightened by what I had exposed.

The Burleys never again spoke to my parents or to me. My parents wondered why, and even asked, but received no explanation. All of John's toys went to Father Raker's. In a few weeks the Burleys put up their house for sale; in a few months Howard retired from business and they went to live in Florida for the rest of their lives.

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a ***NEW*** **short story by**

STEPHEN WASYLYK

Stephen Wasylyk belongs to that rare breed of writers who devote their time exclusively to the short story. He attributes this partly to having grown up "with a volume of O. Henry's works in one hand," but also to the fact that with a novel one must live with the characters one creates for a much greater length of time. Mr. Wasylyk prefers to move on to entirely new creations, as he has done in most of the more than six dozen short stories he has had published, including this new entry for EQMM . . .

ANOMALIES

by STEPHEN WASYLYK

Deep in her lower back, persistent pain gnawed away, bringing the mental image of a TV commercial with twisting ropes and lightning bolts. Her job, the doctor said. Not so. The pain had been there ever since Allan had run off with that malnourished sex object with the big eyes. Sitting behind this teller's window had nothing to do with it. Not being able to get her life into gear did.

Funny. Still thinking like Allan, who had always said cars came with automatic transmissions, but life came with a gear shift. You had to select the proper gear at the right time and do it smoothly. Great gear shifter, Allan. All she'd managed so far was loud grinding noises.

She squirmed, braced one foot against the partition under the counter to ease the pain, and smiled as she passed the deposit slip to the woman. The next patron stepped into view: elderly, gray hair curling from beneath a battered cap pulled low over his eyes. New. Never seen him before.

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She glanced at the slip he slid toward her.

Oh Lord.

DON'T LOOK AROUND OR MAKE A SOUND. PUT THE MONEY IN THE BAG WITH THIS SLIP.

Oh, Lordy, Lord, Lord. The way she was sitting, she couldn't reach the silent alarm with her toe. Wait until she tried to explain *that.*

Tellers must be alert at all times.

Practiced fingers slid a wad of bills into the small paper sack along with the note and pushed it toward him. She looked up in time to see the thick tubular muzzle appear over the edge of the counter, the eyes below the bill of the cap fired with a deep, unholy glee.

"Goodbye, Helga," he whispered.

She jammed her foot against the partition and went over backward just as the gun coughed, the bullet a hot whisper passing over her face; rolling under the protection of the counter as the pistol coughed again.

Her mind was numb. Ice filling her stomach. Noises penetrated: Grace shrieking her name from the booth beside her, a man in the lobby shouting indignantly as he was knocked from his feet, a woman screaming, *That man!*

Her eyes focused slowly on the dun-colored carpet, the stains and wear magnified, the ice in her stomach now working up toward her heart.

He called me by name. How did he know? Just the initial on the nameplate. Not just a holdup. No. He came to kill me.

Why?

They didn't believe her, of course. Not uncommon for someone who had just escaped death to believe she'd been singled out. Called her by name? He must have been in before, heard a customer say something like, "See you tomorrow, Helga." She must have done something to provoke him. She hadn't? Oh well, these people weren't wired very tightly, you know. He must have thought she did. No question he was short in the mental department. Most of these people knew that bank robbery was a federal crime and generally avoided adding to the charge.

That silencer. Intriguing detail. They'd have to hit their computer to see if it showed up elsewhere.

She was seated behind the manager's desk in the small office. Cowper, the senior federal agent, perched on the desk and looked down at her. Dark hair gray at the temples, a face no one would

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ever pick out of a crowd, gray business suit. Marlowe, his junior partner, leaned against the wall, her hands behind her. Long brown hair with the hint of a wave, thin face with a wide mouth, white blouse and the feminine version of Cowper's suit. The tape recorder on the desk hummed.

Harry Roth duplicated Marlowe's pose against the opposite wall, noting the pale face of the woman behind the desk and the hands so tightly clasped in her lap that the knuckles were white. Remarkable woman. No hysterics. He'd seen men who needed a tranquilizer shot. It was there, though, in the face and hands, and couldn't be controlled forever. Cowper didn't see it. He was going down one road and she was going down another.

He glanced at Marlowe, caught her looking at him with an appeal in her eyes. As junior member of the team, she could do nothing.

He grunted as he pushed himself erect. "I think that's enough for today. I'm taking this woman home. She can sign her statement and answer any further questions tomorrow."

Cowper appeared to be on the verge of objecting, looked at Roth's expression, and smiled.

"Of course. I hadn't realized we were being so insensitive."

Insensitive is newspeak for stupid, thought Roth.

He took Helga's arm and led her out of the office, where she was immediately pounced upon by Michelle Buford, the branch manager.

"Helga," she said in a kind voice, "go home and rest. The bank will arrange for you to see Dr. Bostov—"

"I'll be right back," said Roth.

He joined Maguire and Polansky to become one of a trio reflected in the plate glass by the grayness of a dim fall morning: Roth of medium height, at least a month overdue for a haircut and wearing a rumpled suit that sagged because he'd never regained the weight he'd lost after his wife died a year ago; Maguire tall and thin, with styled hair and a suit that sagged through style rather than weight loss; Polansky short and broad, dressed better than both, hair trimmed and tie knotted precisely.

"The sexy manager said she had a good look at him," said Roth. "Take her in to talk to the composite man. We'll compare what she and Mrs.—" He turned to Maguire. "What's her name?"

"Helga Vivaldi."

"—what they each say. If they agree, fine. If not, we'll go somewhere in between."

"Why bother?" asked Maguire. "Bank jobs are for the Feds."

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"Tell me who uses a silencer. A rejected lover? Someone whose toes she mashed when the bus lurched? Why should he anticipate shooting at all? Everyone knows tellers give up the money with no fuss. You don't even *need* a weapon. Just a note."

"You really think it was a hit? Why? Buford says Mrs. Vivaldi lives alone in an apartment, doesn't own a car, doesn't go anywhere or do anything except take an accounting course at the university twice a week—"

"Magoogan—" Roth never remembered names. Except his own, and many were convinced he sometimes had trouble with that. "—look at Miss Bedford."

Maguire grinned. "Buford. It's a pleasure."

Michelle Buford wore a very stylish business suit with a very tight, mid-thigh skirt that showed off very long, shapely legs. Her blond hair appeared to be a frazzled halo. Roth didn't quite approve. How she dressed was her business, of course, but in banking, confidence was the name of the game. Those old bankers with their starched white shirts and somber clothing knew that. People had to be uneasy about trusting their money to someone dressed like a high-priced call girl.

"—to her, a woman like Mrs. Vivucci couldn't possibly generate enough emotion in a man for him to shoot her. Miss Bufoss lives in a very small world. You, Powloski—"

"Polanski," he said automatically.

"—while Maginness here talks to Mrs. Vivandi, dig up what you can on Our Gal Helsa. Someone wants her dead, we better move fast."

"The Feds won't like it," said Maguire.

"The bank job may be federal, but no federal statute covers assault with a deadly weapon. That's ours. If all he wanted to do was to kill her, he could have mugged her or used the old hit-and-run, but if she died in a holdup, we'd never consider her the target at all. Now that he's missed, everything's changed. He has to finish the job any way he can, not only to earn his money but to get rid of a witness. That cement head Cowpen doesn't realize that. He's running the investigation by the book. Get moving."

She sat in his car the way she'd sat in the office. Straight, with hands clasped in her lap. Nice-looking woman, thought Roth. Brown hair cut short and obviously cared for at home. Full, round face but with a lot of character. Sensibly dressed in a very subdued tweed with a little green bow at the throat of the blouse. He wondered at

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corporate policy that made Miss Jiggles a manager and left this one as a teller. People would be far more inclined to trust their money to her.

Must have the fastest reaction time in the world. By the time almost everyone who saw a gun pointed at them realized they were about to be shot, they were dead. Yet she'd made a pro miss. Faster than a speeding bullet. Superwoman.

He cleared his throat. "I agree with what you said. The robbery was a cover. He was hired to kill you, but hit men don't come cheap. Who has enough money to hire one?"

She shook her head. "My Uncle Dennis is wealthy but he has no reason to want me dead. Neither does my Aunt Stephanie. Or my cousin Roger, for that matter. He lives in Hawaii."

"Are you in your uncle's will?"

"If I am, it's only because he feels a family obligation and it certainly wouldn't be much."

"How about a rejected lover or jealous wife?"

She smiled. "Only in my dreams."

"Dead people can't testify," he said thoughtfully.

She half turned to face him. "Testify to what? A crime? The only violence I've seen was a young woman slap a man on the bus, and that was no crime, believe me. I saw what he did. This has been a very dull week, Lieutenant. Duller than usual. Until today."

Her apartment was on the second floor of a converted three-story brownstone; one of a long row that seemed to stretch to the suburbs. He wasn't surprised. The tree-lined street and stately homes retained only an aura of once-gracious living, but she'd prefer that to the slick anonymity of a high-rise or condo.

Double doors with etched glass at the head of wide marble steps opened into a foyer, the hallway that once led to the rear now closed off by a door to create a first-floor apartment.

He jerked a thumb at the door, eyebrows raised.

"Mrs. Longwood," she said. "She owns the building. Eighty years old and moves faster than I do."

He followed her up the stairs and continued to the next flight when she stopped at a door, key in hand. He looked up the long flight.

"I know the man upstairs only to say hello. Quiet. Out most of the time. Mrs. Longwood says he owns a small business a few blocks away."

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Roth climbed the stairs and found another flight behind a door. Bare pine, not carpeted oak. The metal door at the head led to the roof, one of many stretching away on all sides like a flat black desert broken only by chimneys and occasional TV antennas belonging to those still holding out against cable company promises of wonderful new vistas of entertainment.

The door could be opened from the roof only with a key.

Back on the second floor, he found the door of her apartment open for him. He looked down into the street through the wide windows at the front, then at the postage-stamp backyards and high fences through the narrow ones in the kitchen in the rear. No means of access.

"Nice place," he said.

She said, "Thank you," thinking he was referring to the furnishings she'd selected so carefully. He really saw none of them but referred instead to the feeling of harmony and comfort.

"Now that you've had a chance to think a bit more, is there anything else you noticed about the man that you haven't mentioned?"

"No—ah, I—" She raised one hand to stroke her throat, holding the elbow with the other, as though debating the wisdom of saying anything at all. "He, well—" The words came with a rush. "He had a young neck."

He smiled. He knew what she meant. Women had long ago discovered that cosmetics can camouflage an ageing face, but little could be done with a neck once the skin sagged and the creases and wrinkles appeared.

He asked to use her phone.

The operator at the local FBI office said, "We don't have a Merlin. Perhaps you mean Marlowe."

He grunted assent. Marlowe had a nice telephone hello.

"I'm telling you this rather than Coupon—"

"Cowper," she said.

"—because he's a cement head. What we have here is an anomaly. An old man with a young neck."

She spoke very slowly. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It means that all parts of a human body age at the same rate. Those two things on your chest won't always stick out like that, you know—"

She sounded as though something she'd swallowed had gone down the wrong way.

"—and when you see an old man with a young neck it means—"

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"Face makeup." She choked the words out.

"You've got it. Now, I'm sure your computer can't pull out anomalies, but you can scan through a few open cases where a silencer was used and see what turns up. Call me at the office."

He hung up and dialed Maguire. "Is Dolly around?"

"You mean Dorothy. Yeah, she's here."

"Tell her I want her to spend the night with Mrs.—" He fumbled for the name. "You know who. I'm at her apartment. I'll wait until she gets here."

He thrust his hands into his saggy hip pockets and regarded Helga thoughtfully. "A policewoman is coming over." He lifted a hand as she started to protest. "I know, you don't need anyone. I think you do. I don't know why he tried to kill you in the first place, but I do know he'll try again because he has no idea of what you might have noticed about him. Like having a young neck. Understand?"

She nodded, no doubt in her mind that if she objected, the policewoman would camp outside her door.

"Dolly won't bother you or get in your way. Now, you've had a bad day so far and people have been pushing and pulling at you and you need rest, so go into the bedroom and try to relax."

She'd wanted to tell him to stop ordering her around. She'd wanted to tell him she'd decide if she needed protection. Instead, she'd marched into her bedroom, closed the door, leaned back against it, and looked around at the familiar intimacy of the room.

This is your life, Helga Vivaldi.

Who would want her dead? Not Uncle Dennis, that dear old man. Confined to a wheelchair and not knowing if he'd see another spring, he still said, "I promised your father to look after you, Helga."

The closest they'd ever come to an argument was when she insisted on finding a job on her own, rather than taking the one he'd offered in his corporation. "Just like your father," he'd said. "Stubborn."

And Aunt Stephanie? Without her support, she couldn't have made it through the shambles of her life after Allan had left. Cousin Roger? He probably never thought of her from one Christmas card to the next. Mrs. Longwood because she was a day late with the rent? She giggled at the thought. And broke into tears.

She sat on her bed, her face buried in a soaked handkerchief. Not knowing why she wept. Perhaps because of the feeling of failure Allan had left her with. Perhaps because she had nothing to look

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forward to but more empty years behind the teller's window. Perhaps because she had no children or perhaps because Uncle Dennis would never see another spring.

If she'd led a soap-opera life, it might make sense, but about the only one who might want her dead was herself.

Why had she bothered to duck?

She heard the door open, voices, and then the door close.

Roth was gone. In her mind, she saw him shuffling down the hall. She felt more lonely than ever.

"Make it short and fast," said Roth.

"Her maiden name was Stuttgart," said Polanski. "Her father was a professor at Penn and her uncle is Dennis Stuttgart. Made a fortune in real estate. No brothers or sisters. A cousin Roger who is following in his father's footsteps in Hawaii. She was divorced from an Allan Vivaldi three years ago. Late marriage and a short one. Evidently he married her for her name. Thought the uncle would see that his nephew-in-law was taken care of, and maybe pass on some of his money when he died. He conned Helga but he didn't con Uncle Dennis. When he found out he was on his own, he took off with a cocktail waitress who earned big tips—"

"How'd you learn all of this so fast?"

Polanski grinned. "She was divorced, right? Who knows more than a divorce lawyer? He told me what he knew and gave me the name of the family attorney, who filled in a little more. Wouldn't tell me if she was in the will, but hinted that if she was, it wouldn't be enough to get the wife and son upset, so her uncle's money doesn't look like the reason someone wants her dead."

Maguire handed him a sheet of paper. "This is what the world's sexiest bank manager came up with."

The face was full—old and lined, eyes narrow.

Maguire handed him another. "Since she said she had a better look at him in profile—"

The nose was slightly hooked, the jaw heavy, the brow low. Profiles aren't that easy to change.

"Okay." Roth leaned back in his chair. "Here's what we do next. Poslowski, you know where she goes. Look up all incidents during the last few days along her routes where she may have seen something in her travels she doesn't know she saw. Then check with the bank to see if there is a bad odor coming from that branch. When some people have a lot of money flowing under their nose, they can't

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resist dropping a few bills on the floor so that they can pick them up when no one is looking. Macrory, you go over what's on the books in the whole area and look for an anomaly. Since you didn't major in English, I'll explain that an anomaly is a deviation from what would ordinarily be expected. Understand?"

"No," said Maguire.

"Don't worry about it. You'll know one when you see it."

He waved them out of the office as the phone rang.

"Roth," said Marlowe, "I found an anomaly, or what seems to be one, but it's as far as I can go on my own without being fired. An elderly man walked into a restaurant in Cleveland six months ago. No one paid any attention to him until he pulled out a silenced pistol and put a couple of slugs into a well-known criminal attorney who was having lunch with a female friend. The only reason we looked into it was we thought it was related to organized crime. We still do."

"Where's the anomaly?"

"He took off on a ten-speed, which made sense considering how the streets are jammed during the lunch hour. The bicycle was found more than a mile away. The anomaly is that one witness, whom no one paid any attention to, said he pedaled out of there so hard and so fast that anyone as old as he was should have been dead of a heart attack within a few blocks. Now, we either have an elderly man in great shape or—"

"A young one made up to look like one. Like the guy in the bank. You should take this information to Cowpull—"

"Cowper."

"—and tell him it would pay to look into more of these open cases. Couple more anomalies and he could get to be a big hero and get promoted out of your life before your boobs begin to sag."

She was still laughing when the phone went dead.

Dorothy was young, with deep russet hair pulled back and gathered with a clip. The slim body was the kind Helga had always wistfully admired; encased in washed jeans, white blouse, dirty trainers, and a man's leather jacket.

She toured the apartment and settled on the sofa after placing her pistol at her elbow.

Helga recognized it. Glock. She could feel the weight and balance as clearly as if she held it. Uncle Dennis was into handguns and she'd gone shooting with him many times.

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You have a natural talent, Helga. You should take up competition shooting as a hobby.

What she should take up as a hobby is shooting Allan, she'd thought. One toe at a time and then the fingers before working her way into more vital body parts. Her uncle asked why his inoffensive remark brought on a fit of hysterical giggling.

"Let me tell you how his mind works," said Dorothy. "He could have sent someone else, but he asked for me. I know why. Six months ago a guy with an Uzi blew out the window of a car three inches from my head. Psychiatric counseling notwithstanding, it was a long time before I could stop shaking when I thought how easily it could have been my skull shattering into a thousand pieces. I've been there and I know how it feels, so if you want to get drunk, jump up and down and scream, or chew up the bedclothes, you go right ahead. It will be between you and me."

Helga looked at Dorothy's slim, tapering fingers and then at her own, much blunter and shorter. "He seems to have a lot of authority."

"He does. He's the head honcho for this district. You're lucky. He happened to be in the vicinity when he heard the call and stopped in. Ordinarily, he'd let Maguire and Polanski handle it, but something stirred him to take over." She smiled. "Maybe you caught his eye."

"Hardly likely," said Helga drily. "I've never been an eye-catcher. He couldn't even remember my name."

"He doesn't remember anyone's, including the commissioner's. He calls me everything from Dolly to Dawnie. Before his wife died, we'd hear him mutter about calling Jenny or June or Janet. Her name was Jane."

They both laughed.

"None of us mind. We wait to see what variation he'll come up with next. That's about the only fault he has. You may not have noticed, but with a haircut and a suit that fits, he'd be a good-looking man."

Helga didn't tell her she'd noticed.

"Absolutely nothing," said Polanski. "Even with long-range radar for eyes, she couldn't have seen anything, and the bank says the branch is squeaky clean. Buford may be sexy, but she's hell on wheels at her job."

Roth had seen someone pass his office door. His mouth tightened. "I thought I'd given orders to keep Mola out of here."

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"Hard to do. He's a reporter—"

"He's a worthless piece of scum. So's his editor. Dammit—"

He broke off, eyes narrowing. Mola. Three days ago, a man had been found shot in the head, slumped over the wheel of his car in the short-term parking garage at the airport. The attendant, a retiree working part-time for minimum wage, remembered checking out an air force major at just about the time the M.E. had fixed for the time of death.

Made sense. The man would have allowed the major to walk up to him in the deserted garage without giving it a second thought. Service people were supposed to shoot your country's enemies, not you.

Made even more sense when the retiree swore one of the major's chest decorations showed the green, brown, and white of an ETO campaign ribbon, something he was very familiar with since he'd earned one himself. Except the major would have been born after World War II and certainly never fought in *that* theater.

But given the bad light and elderly eyes, the retiree might have been mistaken. Until Roth found that no officer of that rank or description could be placed anywhere near the airport at that time on that day. Not active, in the reserve, or in the National Guard.

Okay, the uniform had to come from somewhere, but no theatrical or uniform supplier had a record of selling or renting one recently.

Mola, the reporter, had found out about the attendant. He'd agreed to keep his mouth shut, but the next day his newspaper carried a story headlined BOGUS AIR FORCE OFFICER SOUGHT IN AIRPORT SLAYING, and naming the retiree as the witness. The moment Roth heard, he'd sent a car to the retiree's house. Dead. Same gun used in the parking garage. The killer must have picked up a very early edition.

Testimony to the power of the press.

"Could be," Roth muttered to himself.

He called Helga and asked if she'd seen an air force officer in the last two days.

She said she hadn't seen an air force officer in the last two years.

"Are you sure?"

"*Of course* I'm sure! I know an air force uniform when I see one!"

He took the phone from his ear and stared at it. Feisty when her common sense was challenged.

Still, the ribbon and the young neck were anomalies that had to connect. Had to be the same man.

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"Second time around," said Polanski as he pushed open the door of the small costume shop. "Doesn't he think we did it right the first?"

"If he did, we wouldn't be here," said Maguire.

The clerk was eighteen or nineteen, short and round, a pad of brown hair sitting on the top of his otherwise shaved skull. He looked up from a loose-leaf notebook on the counter.

"Back again! I told you yesterday, we don't carry military uniforms, so we couldn't have rented one."

Maguire laced his fingers and propped an elbow on the counter. "Doesn't look as though you rent much of anything."

"I haven't been here long enough to judge. I'm just a dumb kid working my way through college. As long as I get my check at the end of the week, I'd be happy if no one came in at all. Gives me more study time."

"You do have blue uniforms, though," said Polanski. "Maybe something that could pass as an air force uniform."

"Well . . . " The clerk rubbed his jaw. "They're sort of like bus driver's or security guard's but you could decorate one up." He slid open a drawer behind the counter. "Have almost anything you want in here. Want to be a general?" He held up a pair of silver stars clipped to a card. "You couldn't get into the Pentagon, but it's just a costume, right?"

"Okay," said Maguire. "See if you rented one of those."

"I don't have to look. I know I didn't."

"Humor me. Go check them out."

The clerk disappeared through a door at the rear of the shop. He returned wearing a frown.

"Something missing?" asked Maguire.

"Not missing. Out of place. Like to keep everything in order, so when I started here I arranged all the costumes according to size. The forty-four was moved into the thirties."

"If you didn't move it, who did?"

"Could have been Mr. Kendrick. He owns the shop but he only comes in three or four times a week to see how things are going. Tell you the truth, I don't think this place makes a dime. I think he runs it as a tax write-off."

"What size does he wear?"

The clerk scrubbed his jaw again. "I'd say a forty-four."

Polanski pushed a pad at him. "His address."

* * *

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When knuckles tapped at the door, Dorothy motioned to Helga to stay where she was. Holding her pistol straight down at her side, she made sure the security chain was fastened and unlatched the door with her other hand.

It burst open with a crash, tearing the chain anchor from the jamb and knocking her off her feet, the pistol skittering across the rug toward Helga.

The capped, gray-haired man leaped through the doorway, pistol thrust before him with both hands. Surprise at seeing Helga across the room, rather than sprawled behind the door, froze him for a moment. His eyes flicked to Dorothy, now perched warily on hands and toes like a sprinter poised for the starter's signal.

To Helga, he seemed to read the situation and settle down, swinging the silenced pistol toward Dorothy as the more dangerous of the two.

She dove from the sofa, scooped up Dorothy's pistol and fired.

The man jerked backward into the hall, his gun coughing and chipping plaster from the ceiling.

Someone shouted. Footsteps pounded up the carpeted stairs.

Roth appeared, gun in hand, jammed a shoe down on the man's wrist, and tore the pistol from him.

Someone, she didn't know who, or much care, wrapped Helga up in big arms just as she started screaming she'd shot Allan.

It hadn't been Allan at all, of course. Just something triggered by the stress, the psychologist explained. She had nothing to worry about because whatever feelings she'd harbored about *him,* she'd shot the man only to save herself and Dorothy. Understand? No, but she didn't tell him that. When she pulled that trigger, she was certain she was shooting Allan. Knew better now, of course. Funny thing, the mind.

Maguire had explained the rest. The man dead in the airport parking garage; the air force major. No one had hired him. He was simply getting rid of another witness like the retiree who had spotted him. She hadn't known she was a witness, of course. She'd never seen anyone wearing an air force uniform, just as she'd told Roth.

Neither had anyone else, said Maguire. Roth realized it didn't have to be a real air force uniform at all. Just similar in cut and color and decorated with a major's oak leaves and chest ribbons. No one would have spotted the deception if the retiree hadn't noticed

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the ribbon, and at that, only three people had seen it and two of those were dead.

Turned out what she *had* seen was a man carrying it in a transparent garment bag on a hanger slung over his shoulder. She'd no idea the bag held anything but an ordinary suit. Didn't matter, though. He couldn't risk her calling the police after reading the story in the paper and saying, I saw a man *carrying* an air force uniform. Interested?

It all sounded very complicated. Roth might have explained it better, but she hadn't seen him since The Day My Niece Became a Heroine, as Uncle Dennis proudly called it. Oh, well—

She turned to check the apartment before she left for work.

No more teller's window. The psychologist had indicated she'd suffered lasting trauma. Good for him. Personally, she had no qualms about going back to one, but if they wanted to give her a new job in check processing along with a raise, she'd be a fool to argue. And her back would undoubtedly appreciate a more comfortable chair.

She locked the door. Mrs. Longwood had tsk tsk'd a great deal about the cost of repair, but the new chain was far stronger. As if a killer breaking down her door again was something to be expected.

She looked up at the third-floor stairs and felt a chill. Imagine having a man living above you who killed for money. He'd smiled at her when he passed by in the hall, carrying that uniform. Smiled, while thinking, Now I have to kill you.

She'd been so angry about that, she wished he'd died, but that had passed. He'd limp for the rest of his life. Revenge enough.

She shuddered and walked quickly down the stairs.

Harry Roth was waiting on the sidewalk.

Her eyes widened with surprise. "What are you doing here? I haven't seen you since— I thought—"

She'd thought he'd disappeared into outer space like every man she'd ever been interested in except Allan, and life would have done her a favor if it had rocketed *him* into permanent earth orbit.

"Busy cleaning the thing up. FBI, the U.S. Attorney, the D.A., all those people. The man committed a lot of very nasty crimes out of his little shop of horrors."

Maguire stood to one side of the steps, Dorothy to the other, along with a heavyset man she'd never seen before.

"Is this a reception committee?"

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"In a way. We checked on Allan, you know. Just routine, covering all possibilities."

"But he lives in Pittsburgh—he couldn't—"

"No, he couldn't." Roth cleared his throat. "Someone shot him three weeks ago. This is Detective—" Roth looked at the heavyset man.

"Redford," said the man.

"—from the Pittsburgh police department. He'd like to talk to you—"

"He was shot at extreme range with a nine-millimeter pistol," said Redford. "A witness said it appeared to be a woman. We thought he had to be mistaken because women—well, you don't generally come across women who handle a pistol real well. Lieutenant Roth tells us you're an exception."

He held open the door of a car at the curb. "It won't take long, Mrs. Vivaldi."

Dorothy went with them.

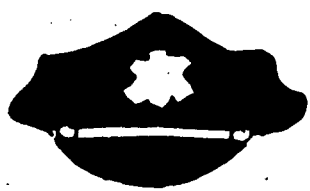
"What do you think?" asked Maguire.

Roth sighed. "I don't know. I hope not. Probably can't prove it anyway. Damn. Sometimes I wish my brain would take a holiday. The doctor said she was screaming she shot Allan because she'd always *wanted* to shoot him, but he admitted that if she really had, it could be sitting in the front of her mind and when she pulled the trigger, she relived the moment. But what do I know? All I know is when you shoot someone, you don't scream you shot someone else. It's—"

"An anomaly?" asked Maguire.

A particularly bitter one, but Maguire couldn't know that.

"A damned shame," said Roth softly.



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Mexican Mauricio-José Schwarz is one of several crime writers from non-English speaking countries who have appeared in EQMM *over the years, but unlike his predecessors he has written his story in English so that we have not had to rely on a translator. Mr. Schwarz has worked as a journalist in Mexico since 1977. He began his fiction-writing career in 1978 with the publication of several science fiction stories, and he has remained active in that field both as a writer and as a founder of the Mexican Science Fiction and Fantasy Association. His first mystery publication came in 1989; he follows it here with a memorable piece of short fiction . . .*

SOUL SCULPTURE

by MAURICIO-JOSÉ SCHWARZ

When he finally decided to kill himself eating six cans of rat poison, Conrad Leifcrown had become the greatest sculptor of the last three decades.

Or so the newspapers said in the long and detailed obituaries published around the world. I wrote several of them.

When Leifcrown arrived in the art world, he was not warmly greeted. In fact, he spent a long time being patronized and despised. If the people in charge of the galleries were polite, they gave him the runaround. But mostly, they threw him out along with his wood-carvings, his plaster creations, his stainless-steel ideas, his bronze experiments.

I saw him change.

I have written about art for various publications since I was in high school. I always enjoyed writing about what I liked, though I never had any formal training in art history or appreciation, and that worked in my favor. My pieces, so they say, are honest, reflecting the point of view of the common man rather than the often contrived and biased lectures some of my colleagues specialize in.

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I saw Leifcrown's work before and after the change. He had talent from the start, that was for sure, but he lacked originality, luster. He seemed destined for the gift and novelty department, churning out designs for porcelain miniature horrors.

But one day he arrived at Henry Moreland's place with a handful of Polaroid shots. I was lucky to be there. The woodcarvings were enticing, and the bronzes were unique. Four of them appeared in the pictures, and not even the bald flash of the old camera and the inadequate backdrop used to take the photographs could mask the quality of his work. And he knew it.

Leifcrown had also changed. He had never been a humble character, nor yet a prima donna, but he had always been shy. Now he seemed perfectly sure of himself and of his work. Henry Moreland was cautiously impressed and agreed to go to Leifcrown's studio once he learned that the pieces were big, five to seven feet tall or long.

I had no reason to hang back. If I sang his praises then, I might later have the golden opportunity to say that I "discovered" Leifcrown.

And I did.

Not that the market accepted him as a new Rodin overnight. But after Henry Moreland agreed to put Leifcrown's work on display, things developed. Gradually he began to have more exhibits, sales, and assignments. He rose steadily and didn't stop until the night he gave in to a craving for rat poison.

His talent was there all along, developing. What had really changed was his approach, his themes, his feelings.

The world was falling down around us then. It still is, and maybe has irrevocably collapsed. But those days were the scariest in a long, long time. All of a sudden the nice kids that were to be the beneficiaries of the civil rights struggle could be found on street corners peddling all sorts of new and dangerous drugs. The dream had become a pipe in every mouth and a .38 midnight special in every pocket. People began dying without any reason, and serial killing seemed to be the rage, with bodies that never reappeared and murderers who smiled too much on camera. Nice couples who had met in college and gotten married after getting jobs and cars were now out on the street along with their dreams and children, fighting for a better cardboard box in which to sleep and sob. Spiritual leaders were carted away to jail for fraud and rape. Business-

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men were their next-cell neighbors, along with the ever-present politicians.

All of that could be found on the faces and figures Leifcrown sculpted. Especially the bronzes. Every cruel metaphor of society was imbedded in the pieces he began to turn out. But that was not all: it wouldn't have been enough to turn him into the artistic demigod he became. There was also the tenderness, the gentle caring that spelled hope amidst the horror. That was what drew you to his figures. Yes, they were often wretched, but never despairing. Victory might have been torn away from their grasp, but not glory. He distilled the horrors of the time and then drew magnificent conclusions that appeared to be rooted in all the good that humanity was capable of. Greatness coming from ruin, promises being born from pain and confusion. His sculptures had a soul, we all knew, but we didn't say it because it sounded corny and trite.

I wrote that if it is the artist's ultimate goal to draw order from chaos, then the world today was perfect raw material for any artist, since chaos had almost eaten up everything that really mattered. And I added that no artist could find such perfect order as Leifcrown had.

Even though I regularly published pieces like that one, in which I hailed him as a genius, and went on writing about every major exhibit and every turn his career took, surely helping to assure his success, we never became friends. Leifcrown had no friends.

He wasn't rude or ill-tempered, and he didn't actively drive people away; he was kind and tolerant. He just didn't seem to have time for his fellow humans. He seemed uncomfortable—not angry, just out of place around other people. So when they came around, they soon felt like intruders and left Leifcrown alone with his clay and plaster and metal.

In that respect I was the closest to him. I enjoyed access to his studio, where I saw his sketches and projects, and tried my best to make good use of the favor, careful never to overdraw the account of privileges allotted me by good luck and a moment of boldness.

I saw that Leifcrown worked in creative attacks, completely devoid of discipline. He could spend weeks without drawing or modeling. Then something would happen and he would go into a frenzy, turning out incredible quantities of work, sculpting several pieces at a time, an armature here, an already cast figure ready for patina to be applied there, a plaster cast way over there, and three or four clay models lying around. In a few weeks, all the pieces would be

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ready for shipment, exhibition, or sale, and Leifcrown would slip back into his artistic inactivity.

I could say now that there was a pattern to his work, but it's maybe only hindsight. When something big happened, it was like a spark that would jump-start his creative process. A gang war in the inner city. A scandalous murder. A large layoff of workers. Big, juicy scandals involving the rich and powerful of the land. The beginning of a new armed conflict somewhere around the world. Any tragedy. Looking back, it seems that he thrived on those events, used them to fuel his sculpting. At least most of the time.

The critics finally raved in a manner reserved only for great long-dead artists like Van Gogh. Leifcrown was on his way to becoming a latter-day Picasso, admired and revered, absolutely successful while still alive and able to enjoy it. He evolved and diversified, creating human figures, mythological creatures, abstract shapes, a strange series of eight sculptures for the blind which were not supposed to be seen by the public, but touched through a dark screen with holes for your hands. And we all talked about the powerful kindness present in every piece, competing for adjectives.

Leifcrown fascinated not only art critics, but the world at large. Art-school teachers talked about his sculptures in class. His generous contributions to charities touched the imaginations of people who never went to art exhibits. His "Broken Hands" bronze, which he donated for the entrance to the Red Cross building in Geneva, found its way into all the newspapers when it was unveiled.

More than a sculptor, Leifcrown was fast becoming a pop hero: an event, a cult personality, even though he shunned publicity and hardly ever went to social events. That made him all the more interesting.

Then it happened. I was with him.

It was back in Henry Moreland's gallery, where a grand exhibit celebrating Leifcrown's fiftieth birthday was being prepared. Leifcrown was always there when his sculptures were moved around. He was overprotective of them. He orchestrated the movements of the strong men who loaded and unloaded, crated and uncrated his art.

Somehow, someone forgot that one of the exhibition rooms was split-leveled. While Leifcrown was talking with Moreland, a mover carted one of the sculptures right through. It bounced on the two steps, fell off the gurney, and crashed to the floor with a sound that

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rolled through the whole building. And later through the whole country.

We ran to the room. Nothing serious seemed to have happened. Bronze is tough. It was one of those abstract figures that always seemed to be something and was nothing, and there was just a tiny hairline crack running along one side of it, but Leifcrown blew like a landmine. He threw himself against one of the burly men carrying the sculptures until the man gingerly pushed him away and Moreland intervened. I tried to talk with Leifcrown, but he left hurriedly.

He never came back. That night he died, and he was found the next morning by the cleaning woman who took care of his apartment. There was no suicide note, but the circumstances were evident, and many concluded that his inordinate love for his sculptures had detonated all the little problems that had been slowly building inside him. Seeing one of them broken had made him go over the edge.

That was when we all wrote the eulogies that sang his praises to the world. Long-winded pieces, careful analyses, academic considerations, and loving articles. As he lay in state, as he was buried, as the decision was made to open the exhibit as a posthumous homage to Leifcrown, newspapers and magazines ran thousands, maybe millions of words about the late sculptor.

The exhibit opened in a gloomy atmosphere. When I arrived, the whispering that had taken the place of the loud conversation usually found at openings subsided even more. Many of those present knew that Leifcrown and I were close.

I remember going over to the small room where the damning broken sculpture remained, guiltily showing the world the tiny crack through which Leifcrown had fallen along with his talent. I questioned Henry Moreland's judgment, but the family of our late genius had agreed to let the sculpture be shown. After all, the circumstances surrounding his death were widely known, in part because of me.

The bronze piece stood there as if it had no regrets.

Then I smelled the peppermint odor. It was unlike anything I knew, a piquant faint suggestion of camphor. A man next to me looked worried. He recognized me.

"Phenol," he said with a hint of accusation in his voice.

* * *

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So it finally happened: the discovery of the body of a teenaged girl inside the piece, and the sculpture bashing that ensued. Literally. All of Leifcrown's works were ripped apart.

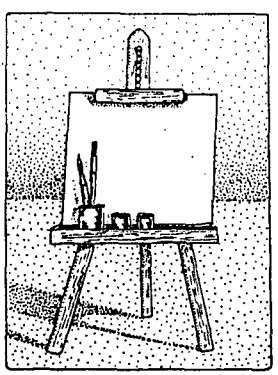
There were maybe twelve bodies in all, some limbs or organs appearing in this or that sculpture. Certainly not every bronze by Leifcrown was an urn, they were the least, but his work was tainted. His monumental works, notably "Broken Hands," were torn down hastily and melted away.

The police were able to piece together the image of a "classic" serial murderer, whatever that is. They found incriminating bits and pieces in his studio which had been overlooked while they were only investigating the suicide of an artist, thinking that suicide is the proper exit for eccentrics like Leifcrown. They solved a good number of mysterious disappearances, missing persons reports that were answered by the contents of so many heretofore beautiful pieces, although they are still trying to figure out his M.O.

I really don't care about that. What he did, he did. We purport to believe that a man's work must be separated from his personal life, but that is hard to do in Leifcrown's case. No one has even tried to defend the artistic value of his sculptures since.

But I do care what we are to do, we, those of us who praised Leifcrown, who helped him rise to fame and fortune. What are we to think about any work of art from this day on? Can we ever forgive ourselves?

But perhaps there is nothing to forgive. We can only regret our words. Regret his work. Regret the world that bore Conrad Leifcrown. And wonder . . .



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a ***NEW*** short story by

BARBARA OWENS

San Jose, California resident Barbara Owens is becoming one of our most regular and dependable contributors. This time she weaves a sinister tale of what the media nowadays calls "elderly abuse . . ."

ALL IN THE EYES

by BARBARA OWENS

Mrs. Hucklebee collects things. Not fine crystal, burnished copper, or brass; not antique dolls, elaborate thimbles, or quaint salt and pepper shakers. All are easily obtainable within her city, but such items do not strike a responsive chord in this lady's individualistic heart.

No, Mrs. Hucklebee is drawn to the ordinary. Everyday things that flick by at vision's edge, easily overlooked—like wedding announcements in the newspaper. A regular weekend highlight is the clipping of these announcements, careful scrutiny of each smiling face, and then the verdict: an inked *X* in the picture's upper right-hand corner—red if the couple will live together long and faithfully, black if their future is doomed by death, divorce, or who can tell. Then placement into a scrapbook, its predecessors lining shelves along one living room wall, and Mrs. Hucklebee sits back, satisfied.

"It's in the eyes," she always announces aloud. "All in the eyes."

The opposite wall shelves contain her dried-leaf scrapbooks, each specimen carefully preserved under plastic wrap, and recently she's embarked upon a new and exciting accumulation. Already jelly, pickle, and mayonnaise jars soldier the window sills, holding clear-colored glass marbles like those used in flower arrangements. Mrs.

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Hucklebee loves to sit watching little rainbows slide slowly across the room.

However, it's a leaf that absorbs her on this sharp bright October day. She has discovered it while walking home from the pharmacy, and when she spies a neighbor in the park Mrs. Hucklebee can't resist sharing her good fortune. Joining the younger woman on the bench, she unwraps the leaf from its pocket tissue, gently stroking its golden face.

"Look at that. See how coppery the veins are?"

"A beauty," Mrs. Gambrelli responds warmly. "What a fine one for your collection."

While Mrs. Hucklebee folds the leaf back into its protective tissue, Mrs. Gambrelli says, "One of the last of the season, I'm afraid. Winter's knocking. Sometimes I worry about you, Mrs. Hucklebee, alone in that big house. You call if you ever need anything, you understand?"

Mrs. Hucklebee smiles tolerantly. Mrs. Gambrelli is new to the neighborhood.

"Don't you worry about me, dear. Mr. Hucklebee's been gone so long I'm used to being on my own."

Suddenly a wail sounds. Little Joey has swooped down the playground slide and landed hard. Before Mrs. Gambrelli can move a figure appears, scoops up the boy, and trots toward the bench, whispering close against his ear. When Joey is deposited into his mother's lap he's sunny again.

"Thank you," Mrs. Gambrelli says, cuddling her son to her breast. "Where did you come from so fast?"

The figure is that of a young girl, scarcely more than a child herself. Thin-faced, with dark ragged hair, she wears worn jeans and a dirty windbreaker that seems too light for such a chilly day. As Mrs. Hucklebee looks up at her the girl's brown eyes pass slowly across her face.

"I could use a dollar," she says to Mrs. Gambrelli.

Mrs. Gambrelli looks flustered. "Oh, I'm sorry. I haven't brought my purse."

Magnanimously, Mrs. Hucklebee opens her own. "Here." She presses a bill into the girl's small cold hand. "Get a cup of hot chocolate. Aren't you cold in that little jacket? You should go home and put on something warm."

The girl murmurs, "Thanks." Before turning away, she studies Mrs. Hucklebee's face again. The women watch her walk away and disappear into a tangle of shrubbery nearby.

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"Sad to see children begging on the streets," Mrs. Gambrelli says, tightening her hold on Joey.

Mrs. Hucklebee has already forgotten the girl. She's gazing fondly at her house on the corner across the boulevard—dark and tall, a high stone wall enclosing its backyard. She is unaware of its slightly shabby appearance, a darkening tooth in the street's otherwise pleasant smile. Mrs. Hucklebee's home is her haven. It holds all her treasures.

She stands up abruptly. "So nice talking to you, Mrs. Gambrelli. I must go and see to my new leaf."

She hurries across the boulevard, eager, not feeling the eyes that follow her all the way home.

With winter approaching, dusk lowers earlier each day. By the time the golden leaf is shrouded in plastic and placed inside a scrapbook the lights are on, glowing valiantly in cavernous old rooms, dimmed by dark wainscoting and faded wallpaper. Mrs. Hucklebee hums in her kitchen while chicken pops and fizzles in a black iron skillet and the aroma of baking banana bread wafts into the far recesses of the house.

The doorbell stirs her from her complacency. In the feeble pool cast by the porch light the girl from the park smiles at her through the screen.

"I'm hungry," she says in a small clear voice. "You're so nice I know you'll want to give me something to eat. I'll work for it. Is that fried chicken I smell?"

She's holding the door handle—the screen begins to open. Startled, Mrs. Hucklebee backs away.

"But I—" she says.

The girl's inside. Still smiling, her dark eyes innocent. The eyes, Mrs. Hucklebee's brain reminds her faintly, it's always in the eyes. She takes another backward step.

The girl says over her shoulder, "It's okay, Wolf. Come on. I told you, didn't I?"

Wolf. "I don't like dogs," Mrs. Hucklebee manages softly before a dark figure materializes from the porch shadows, and now she faces two strange young people in her little vestibule. The second one is a boy, a tall reed in a long black coat, his hair so pale it appears white. The upper half of his face is shrouded by wrapped sunglasses so dark the lenses look painted. Mrs. Hucklebee can't see his eyes.

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"I don't know about this," she begins hesitantly. But the girl has already moved past her, leaving a scent of cold and smoke, or skin not quite clean. The boy is motionless just inside the front door, blank glassed eyes fixed on Mrs. Hucklebee's face. After a long moment he reaches behind him and closes the solid old door.

"Is this way the kitchen?" the girl asks from somewhere behind her. "Come on, Wolf. It's so nice and warm in here."

Both children are seated at the kitchen table, Mrs. Hucklebee's solitary supper set before them. She hovers uncertainly near the stove.

"Thank you, Mrs. Hucklebee," the girl says. "You're a nice lady."

"How do you know my name?" she asks in surprise.

"It's on the mailbox." The girl doles out food, three equal portions on thick white plates. "I'm Crystalbell and this is Wolf, by the way." She smiles. "We haven't had a real meal for days."

The boy has not removed his dusty black coat or the heavy sunglasses. He also has not spoken. Mrs. Hucklebee eyes the plate waiting for her at the table and a little tremble starts somewhere near her heart.

"Crystalbell's a pretty name," she murmurs weakly.

"Well, it's not my real one, of course. I think people should pick the name they want, don't you? That's what me and Wolf did. What's your name, for instance?"

Mrs. Hucklebee answers, "Edwina," before she can stop herself.

Crystalbell laughs, the sound as light and tinkly as her name. "There, you see? We'll have to do something about that."

The boy begins to eat slowly and methodically. Mrs. Hucklebee seats herself gingerly at the table.

"Wouldn't you like to take off your coat?" she addresses him tentatively. "And those glasses?" Suddenly it occurs to her that he might be blind. She looks the question at Crystalbell. The girl grins through a mushy mouthful of banana bread.

"Two things you need to know about Wolf, Mrs. H. He doesn't talk and he doesn't take off his glasses. Ever. Wolf's not too crazy about the world, so he pretty much lives in his own. Remember that and you'll get along fine." She hesitates. "And it's really best if you don't hassle him. He's got a short fuse."

Mrs. Hucklebee experiences a little chill. What is happening here? Where did these children come from and what are they doing eating fried chicken in her house?

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Crystalbell says, "You got a nice big house here. Live all by yourself?"

"Yes," Mrs. Hucklebee answers, trying to organize her thoughts. "Mr. Hucklebee's been dead for years."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that," the girl says. "Looks like he left you pretty well fixed, though. You got any kids?"

"A son. But I'm not sure where he lives. He—we're not close." Her head clears slightly. "How old are you, child? Where's your home, your family?"

"I'm thirteen," Crystalbell answers calmly. "Wolf here's fifteen. We been together almost two years. Gone all over, you'd be surprised."

Mrs. Hucklebee can't help feeling sorry for the little waif. "But how do you live? Where do you sleep? Tonight—where will you go tonight?"

For a moment Crystalbell doesn't answer. Then her eyes raise. She looks like she's trying not to cry.

"I was hoping we could stay here. You got such a nice big house. You know, I was noticing your kitchen cabinets—they could use a good cleaning. And I bet you got a yard out back needs work. Wolf could do that for you. He loves to dig."

Mrs. Hucklebee slides a fearful glance at the silent boy. Hunched over his empty plate, he's watching her. She sees her own distorted image reflected in the black glass over his eyes. The tremble near her heart lurches.

"Oh no," she hears herself whisper. "There must be shelters. I could call—find a place for you to stay."

Crystalbell leans close to lay a warm hand on her arm. "It'll be okay, Mrs. H. Honest. Kind of nice in a way—like a family."

Mrs. Hucklebee tears her eyes from the boy's steady blind gaze. "But most of my rooms are used for storage, you see. I don't have—"

"Don't worry about us," Crystalbell assures her with a firm pat. "We can just throw some blankets down on the living room floor."

The remark startles her. "Both of you? But surely the two of you don't—"

"Now, Mrs. H," Crystalbell says with a small smile, "I don't ask you nosy questions, do I? You show me the blankets and I'll take it from there."

Later, after the dishes are washed and lights are out, Mrs. Hucklebee lies upstairs in her safe warm house, her head spinning. The girl did too ask nosy questions—about who lived in the house

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and where was her family. She remembers Mr. Hucklebee saying not long before he died, "I'm worried about you, Edwina. You're so flighty. You don't know how to handle things. What will happen to you when I'm not here to take care of you?"

Mrs. Hucklebee sits up in bed. Then, heart skidding, she rises and creeps down the back stairs to the kitchen, wishing she'd had the good sense to have a telephone installed on the second floor. The house is dead black but she feels her way with ease, knowing every inch of the way even in the dark.

As the stairway door creaks open and she steps down into the kitchen, Crystalbell's voice reaches through the dark.

"I hope you're not planning to make a phone call, Mrs. H. Wolf cut the wires. Something about a telephone ringing makes him nuts."

Mrs. Hucklebee stands frozen, trying to calm her breathing. "I want you to leave tomorrow," she says finally, but even she can hear the lack of conviction in her voice.

"You know, you're lucky I'm here," Crystalbell confides softly. "I'm the only one knows how to handle Wolf. Go on, you better get back to bed before you catch cold."

Feeling tottery, recognizing every one of her seventy-two years, Mrs. Hucklebee obeys.

She wakes in the morning to the faint smell of coffee and her heart instantly begins to quiver. They're down there, waiting for her in the kitchen. She can think of nothing else to do but join them.

Crystalbell's clean, her short spiky hair soft and shining. She's still wearing the ragged blue sweater and worn jeans, but Wolf has taken off his coat. Mrs. Hucklebee eyes the flannel shirt he wears, too large for him, billowing across his bony chest. She makes a little sound.

"Where did you get that shirt? That's Mr. Hucklebee's!"

Wolf freezes for a moment, then begins to turn toward her. Crystalbell lays a hand on his arm. Her smile twinkles across the room.

"It was in an old box of stuff in one of the back rooms. We didn't think you'd care. After all, Mr. H is dead, isn't he?" She darts across the room to seize Mrs. Hucklebee's hand. "Come on, I fixed breakfast. The coffee's good, but the eggs—well, I can't cook worth a damn. You'll have to teach me."

Suddenly Mrs. Hucklebee sees the long carving knife Wolf holds in his hand. All her kitchen knives are spread across the drainboard.

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Her throat tries to close. "What are you doing with my knives?" she asks helplessly, knowing he won't answer.

Crystalbell takes the knife from him and urges him to the table. "They were all dull. Wolf sharpened them for you. Wasn't that nice of him?" Her eyes flash an unmistakable warning.

"Very nice, yes," Mrs. Hucklebee says quickly. She feels the sting of tears as she adds, "Thank you, Wolf."

A smile opens suddenly beneath the black glasses. Wide and toothy, canines sharp as needles. Mrs. Hucklebee suddenly imagines herself dashing for the door, fleeing down the steps and into the street. But Crystalbell's firm hands are seating her at the table and they are once more gathered to eat.

"Mrs. H," Crystalbell says with a grin, "I think I got the perfect name for you. Feather. What do you think?"

Mrs. Hucklebee can't respond. Eggs stick in her throat and her knees tremble. She shakes her head, mute.

"Well, maybe not," Crystalbell concedes brightly. "But don't worry. I'll come up with the right one yet."

After breakfast, while Crystalbell cleans the kitchen cabinets and Wolf goes out to the walled backyard, Mrs. Hucklebee sits in her living room, hands tightly folded in her lap. The day is gray and cheerless—the marbles in the windows send no rainbows chasing each other across the floor. Periodically, Mrs. Hucklebee stares longingly at the front door. Once, as she does this, she sees Crystalbell watching her from the hall archway.

"Why you looking at the door like that, Mrs. H?"

When she receives no answer the girl comes to her, kneels, and takes both her hands.

"Wolf and me just want to stay awhile, that's all," she says softly.

Mrs. Hucklebee gazes down into the warm brown eyes. "This is my house," she answers stoutly. "I don't want you here."

Crystalbell sighs heavily. "Well, we're here, so we'll all just have to make the best of it until Wolf's ready to leave. The thing is, he likes it, especially all those pretty marbles you got."

"How can you tell?" Mrs. Hucklebee asks in despair. "The boy doesn't even talk?"

"He does sometimes, to me. But mostly I just been with him so long I know what he's thinking." The girl leans closer. "I'll tell you something for your own good, Mrs. H. You got to be careful with

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Wolf. I didn't tell you this before, but I think he might've killed someone before we got together."

Mrs. Hucklebee's breath catches. "No!"

The girl nods. "Least he says he did. So you got to go easy. Say you decide to sneak out and call the police or something. Well, I don't know what he'd do." She glances up at the shelves ringing the room. "If he couldn't do something bad to you, I bet he'd at least do something to all this stuff you save. Probably set it on fire."

For a moment, Mrs. Hucklebee fears her heart has stopped. She squeezes the girl's hand, hard. "Not my collections! Crystalbell, you've got to get away from him. We both do!"

Crystalbell looks serious. "I've been thinking that very same thing. Hang on, Mrs. H, let me figure something out."

They are suddenly allies and Mrs. Hucklebee feels better. "But right now," Crystalbell says, jumping up, "I got to go to the store for you. You're low on some things, you know. Come on, you help me decide what to get."

"You don't have to go," Mrs. Hucklebee answers. "I always just call the market and they—" She stops, remembering her disabled phone.

"I don't mind," the girl says gently. "It's too cold out for you anyway. Can I help cook supper tonight? I really need to learn."

"But if you go—don't leave me here alone with him."

"I told you," Crystalbell repeats patiently, "you'll be okay if you just don't hassle him. Come on, Mrs. H, you and me are in this together now."

After the girl is gone and Mrs. Hucklebee is alone in the house, she parts the kitchen curtains and peeps into the backyard. Wolf is spading up her dying vegetable garden, the strength in his arms belying their puny size. There are piles of fresh dirt lying everywhere. Before she can close the gap in the curtains the white head lifts and turns toward her, as if he feels her watching. Mrs. Hucklebee scurries back to the living room. She wants to run, but her collections—what would he do to them? She's still sitting in the living room when Crystalbell returns.

"Guess what I got for you!" the girl greets her. Her hair is ruffled, her eyes shining. She holds up a deep orange leaf, a perfect specimen, and waves it before Mrs. Hucklebee's delighted eyes. "Look at that. Not even one little chunk missing."

Cradling the leaf, Mrs. Hucklebee follows her into the kitchen. Crystalbell lifts a hand-wrapped package from her grocery bag.

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"I met the lady from the park yesterday. She was bringing you some homemade cookies." The girl busies herself putting groceries away. "I hope you don't care, but I said I was your granddaughter. She wondered why we didn't recognize each other yesterday, so I told her we hadn't seen each other since I was a baby, you know, with your son living so far away and all. Anyway, she says she won't bother you while you have company—she'll see you some other time."

Mrs. Hucklebee smoothes her rich orange leaf, scarcely hearing. The kitchen smells of pine cleanser. When she opens the cupboard to reach for the plastic wrap, everything inside is neat and clean.

"Thank you, Crystalbell," she says. "Thank you for my leaf. What a thoughtful thing for you to do."

During the second week that Wolf and Crystalbell are with her, Mrs. Hucklebee discovers that Mr. Hucklebee's gold watch is missing from her bureau drawer. It has lain there with her hankies since he passed away. Crystalbell is wearing a new red sweater and jeans but Mrs. Hucklebee is too distraught to notice.

The girl listens attentively. "And you think Wolf took it? He wouldn't do that, Mrs. H."

"Well, I don't know what else to think. What should we do?"

Crystalbell looks apprehensive. "No telling what'll happen if you just walk up and accuse him," she says in a low voice. "You better let me talk to him."

They're huddled together in the kitchen. Across the hallway Wolf is sitting by the living room window, staring gloomily into the rain. He gets tense and edgy when he can't go outside to dig.

While Crystalbell goes in to him, Mrs. Hucklebee stands at the kitchen door. She longs to go outside, to smell the rain, to stop and see Mrs. Gambrelli or buy her own food at the market. She's growing ever more fond of Crystalbell, but the boy with those blank glass eyes—she shivers. She's hurriedly tugging on her rain boots when Crystalbell returns.

The girl kneels at her feet. "What're you doing, Mrs. H?"

Mrs. Hucklebee's voice trembles. "I need some air. I haven't been outside since I don't know when. I want to take a walk."

Crystalbell's small hands stay hers. "I don't think that's a good idea right now." Gently, she begins to remove the boots. "Wolf's pretty mad that you think he stole Mr. H's watch. You'd better make up with him before he does something."

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And Mrs. Hucklebee's boots are off, aligned back on the floor. She looks at them, at the girl, and shivers again.

Crystalbell coaxes her to her feet. "Show me your wedding collection, okay? Come on, you can take a walk some other time."

Wolf doesn't look up as they settle together on the sofa. Hunched over, he's staring at the jars of marbles on the window sill.

Crystalbell nudges her. "Maybe if you say something he'll feel better," she whispers. "You know, like you made a mistake about the watch."

Mrs. Hucklebee's heart knocks against her ribs. She moistens her lips. "I'm sorry, Wolf," she manages in a small voice. "I'm sure I was mistaken about the watch."

"Sure," Crystalbell chimes in. "It's going to show up, I bet."

The big old room is silent. After a moment, Wolf's head turns. Mrs. Hucklebee wants to close her eyes against those black pools facing her, but she forces a smile. He's wearing a sweater that belonged to Mr. Hucklebee, and for a moment Mrs. Hucklebee wants to cry. Then he stands and walks slowly from the room without looking back. Footsteps on the stairs, then a door closes somewhere up there. Pacing, the sound of footfalls back and forth above their heads.

Mrs. Hucklebee clenches her hands. "When is he going to leave?"

Crystalbell pats her. "I'm working on it. Trust me, Mrs. H. And, honest, he really likes you. Now can I see your collection?"

After only a few moments, Mrs. Hucklebee is lost in the comfort of the scrapbook's pages. Crystalbell seems interested in the *X* marks.

"So how do you do it—know which ones will work and which ones won't?"

"The eyes," Mrs. Hucklebee responds wisely. "Everything a person is—it's all there in the eyes."

The girl is bent low over a page. For a moment she's silent. Then, "Of course, you could be wrong."

Something amiss in her voice, an edge, a barb of amusement. Mrs. Hucklebee pauses, a page half turned. Then the young face lifts, eyes clear and guileless under the ragged bangs.

"I mean, you don't really know what happens after, do you?"

Mrs. Hucklebee relaxes. "I know," she answers a trifle smugly. "I'm very good at reading eyes."

Crystalbell smiles, leans back, arms flung along the sofa's back. "Well, that's good, Mrs. H," she says softly. "Real good. That must be a handy talent to have."

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Mrs. Hucklebee is too absorbed in the pages to hear. Everything else, the rain outside and the overhead footsteps, has faded away.

As Thanksgiving approaches, Crystalbell begins to plan a holiday feast.

"Turkey. Yams. Oh, and oyster stuffing, Mrs. H, we have to have that. Pumpkin pie. All that good family stuff, won't it be fun?"

"Wouldn't you rather be home with your real family?" Mrs. Hucklebee asks plaintively. "Where are they? How long have you been away from them?"

Crystalbell hugs her. "There you go again with nosy questions," she chides, and darts away to the backyard to tell Wolf of the meal to come.

Mrs. Hucklebee looks after her helplessly. Crystalbell can't seem to do enough for her. The old house preens from top to bottom, but she wants her old life back. Quiet days alone in her comfortable home, walks in the park, meals in her kitchen without a sinister blind-eyed boy sitting close beside her.

He has taken to walking the house at night. On several occasions she's risen to find him standing at the head of the stairway or walking stealthily through the upstairs hall. The shadowy sight of him in the darkened house always sends her fleeing back to her bedroom, where she lies awake for hours, hands pressed flat across her thumping heart.

Once Mrs. Gambrelli comes to invite her over for coffee. Mrs. Hucklebee answers the door and suddenly he's there, close to her shoulder, just out of sight behind the archway, his whole body rigid. Mrs. Hucklebee is so frightened that she hears herself saying, "No, thank you, my granddaughter is still here and I'm so enjoying her company. Maybe some other time."

And coins are missing that were left to her by her father, rare old coins that have rested in a little wooden box since she was a child. The box is empty now, but Mrs. Hucklebee is too afraid to mention it. Only Crystalbell stands between her and the boy.

But it can't continue. She must *do* something. After Thanksgiving, she promises herself fiercely. Then we'll see.

Crystalbell is learning how to cook. She makes a cheese omelet for breakfast one morning and it turns out nicely. The sun is shining, thin and bright. Before Wolf goes outside to dig he sits for a while in the living room, watching marble rainbows creep across the floor.

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As Mrs. Hucklebee rises for more coffee, he looks through the hall at her and smiles, a white flash of sharp teeth before she looks away, trembling.

"Mrs. H," Crystalbell whispers, leaning across the table, "tomorrow's Wolf's birthday. He'll be sixteen. Why don't we fix something special? What's that thing you make with the apricot stuff? That's his favorite—he told me."

"Just pork roast with apricot glaze," Mrs. Hucklebee answers.

Crystalbell leans back triumphantly. "That's it. And I'll make a cake. It'll be fun."

All Mrs. Hucklebee feels is dread.

Crystalbell makes the birthday cake, then leaves the kitchen to Mrs. Hucklebee to prepare the main course. Wolf is digging. Mrs. Hucklebee doesn't like to look outside anymore—there are deep holes all over her backyard.

The weather is dark and cloudy, threatening rain or snow. By three in the afternoon the kitchen grows dim, but Mrs. Hucklebee is so intent on trimming the roast with one of her newly sharpened knives that she delays turning on lights until she's finished. The pork is a good cut, rich and red. The long butcher knife easily pares marbled fat away from succulent lean.

The kitchen is quiet and cozy, apricot glaze simmering on the stove. Mrs. Hucklebee is feeling almost content when something suddenly brushes against her arm.

Startled, she begins to turn. There's a hand on her arm, a thin pale hand. She hears a sound in her throat before she lifts her eyes to see him close behind her, touching her, his free arm reaching. Dead black glass where his eyes should be, teeth bared inches from her face, and Mrs. Hucklebee doesn't realize she's moving, pushing at him, until she feels the knife hesitate, meet resistance, then break through and slide easily to its hilt. She removes it, looks at it, then uses it three more times before she stops herself, arm hanging limply at her side.

Wolf crumples slowly, sagging against her. Mrs. Hucklebee backs away, and he continues gracefully to the floor, settling finally on his back. She hears something like a sigh; otherwise he makes no sound.

Her next awareness is of Crystalbell on the floor beside him. The girl feels for a pulse, a heartbeat, then looks up at Mrs. Hucklebee with wide eyes.

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She doesn't ask what happened. She only says in her clear little voice, "He's gone, Mrs. H. Wolf's gone."

Joints creaking, Mrs. Hucklebee plunges to her knees beside him. Her hands shake as she snatches away the black glasses. No use, no use! His eyes are closed.

"He touched me, Crystalbell. He *touched* me!"

Crystalbell reaches across the body, takes the glasses from her, and gently replaces them over Wolf's eyes. Then she takes the bloodied knife from Mrs. Hucklebee's hand and slowly settles back on her heels.

"Me and Wolf sure been a lot of places together," she says. Their eyes meet. "He was only going to hug you. I told him about the apricot pork and he wanted to give you a hug."

Mrs. Hucklebee regains her feet with difficulty and sinks into a kitchen chair near his shoulder. She sits for a while, watching blood pool on her freshly waxed floor.

"What am I going to do?" she asks in wonder.

"Well, they'll put you away for it, that's for sure," Crystalbell says. "Let me think."

"Away?" Mrs. Hucklebee echoes.

After a few moments Crystalbell goes down to the basement and returns with arms full of plastic dropcloths from the last time Mr. Hucklebee painted the house, years before.

"Help me," she says, and together they wrap Wolf carefully, securing him with duct tape, then drag him to a spot near the kitchen door while Crystalbell meticulously cleans the butcher knife and Mrs. Hucklebee's kitchen floor.

After that, they wait. When it's dead dark outside, they carry him between them out into the raw November night and place him in one of his own deep holes against the stone wall, smoothing dirt over its top when they are done.

Back in the kitchen, Crystalbell makes cheese sandwiches and they both drink scalding black coffee. Mrs. Hucklebee feels numb.

Finally, Crystalbell says matter-of-factly, "He never would have hurt you. Ever. I made all that up to scare you so you'd let us stay. Wolf wouldn't hurt anybody. He had a real bad life, Mrs. H. I don't know all of it, but I know enough. He needed someone to look out for him and that's what I did." Her voice sounds different, older and not so warm.

"His family," Mrs. Hucklebee whispers. "Someone will miss him."

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Crystalbell shakes her head. "Not from what he told me, they won't. Besides, I don't even know his real name." She lays a firm hand on Mrs. Hucklebee's arm. "If any of the neighbors saw him and mention it, we'll just say he went away." Her eyes look flat and her lip curls. "Who'll care? He's just another street kid, right?"

Mrs. Hucklebee is trying to concentrate, but her brain feels splintered. "I simply don't know what to do."

"You let me worry about that," Crystalbell says sharply.

"But you can't stay here. Not now."

The girl leans close. Her words are slow and precise. "Now that's where you're wrong. You and me are the only ones know about this. We got to stick together. See, I worked hard on setting this up, getting me some kind of family. I won't let you mess it up. One peep from me and it's off you go, Mrs. H. Locked up, you understand? What'll happen to all that stuff you collect then?"

A terrible pain drives itself into Mrs. Hucklebee's heart. All her treasures. Her eyes rise slowly to meet the brown ones across the table. Pretty puppy eyes.

"I see," she says. "I understand. Of course you'll have to stay."

The first snowfall begins the following morning, tiny wet flakes that sting. Mrs. Hucklebee pores over the weekly wedding announcements while Crystalbell goes to the market with a list of her own making—peanut butter, cookies, potato chips, and pop.

Mrs. Hucklebee is thinking more clearly today. Her treasures are safe. Crystalbell will help her guard what happened here. And the girl has promised they can have the telephone reconnected. When she hears quick footsteps on the porch, she hurries to open the door. Crystalbell has snowflakes sparkling in her hair.

"Look what I found!"

A bag of marbles is thrust into Mrs. Hucklebee's hand. They are the color of warm caramel.

"Amber!" Crystalbell exults. "I bet you never saw that color before. And it's the perfect name for you, too—Amber. I told you I'd come up with one."

Mrs. Hucklebee peers behind the girl to see who's standing there. Very tall, thick in the chest. Hair black and oily, a gold ring dangling from one ear. This one is a man, not a boy, and something is sitting on his shoulder. Mrs. Hucklebee draws a quick breath. "I don't like monkeys," she says softly.

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They're moving past her, into the house. "This is Midnight," Crystalbell says, clutching the man's ragged sleeve. "And the little guy is Demon."

The monkey bares yellow teeth and reaches for Mrs. Hucklebee with leathery little fingers. He smells foul. She shudders, gazing hopefully into the man's eyes. One is pale blue, watery, shot with red. The other is made of glass. A cold marble eye looking back at her. His face shows no expression.

The front door is closing. Mrs. Hucklebee glances wistfully through it. The girl is pulling the big man into the kitchen.

"Wait till you see," she is telling him. "We're loaded with food, all kinds of good stuff. How about some pork roast? Or birthday cake? I made it myself."

Mrs. Hucklebee looks down at the cluster of clear tawny balls inside the plastic bag. Such a lovely warm color.

"Hey!" Crystalbell is in the kitchen doorway, beckoning. "Come on, Amber, time for something to eat." Her face is bright. "You really like the marbles?"

Mrs. Hucklebee turns away from her front door. "I do," she says earnestly. "They're beautiful. You're so thoughtful, Crystalbell."

DETECTIVERSE

MOTHER GOOSE NURSERY CRIMES III

Sing a Song of Sixpence

by GLORIA ROSENTHAL

Sing a song of sixpence,
A pocket full of rye;
Four and twenty blackbirds
Baked in a pie;
When the pie was opened,
The FDA appeared
And shut the baker down because
His ingredients were weird.

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A sunny college town at the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, Boulder, Colorado, is not only the home of author Suzanne Jones but the setting for her latest story. "As always," she tells us, the story derives from her interest in "why people behave as they do, even if the behavior is sometimes self destructive . . ."

NO CONNECTION

by SUZANNE JONES

Paul noticed her right away. She was as incongruous in the coffee shop as if she had black, brown, or yellow skin. Boulder doesn't have very many members of minorities, the largest concentration of whom may be found on the very successful football team at the University of Colorado. No, she was as Waspish as the rest of the clientele who were enjoying the smell of freshly ground coffee and the warmth of the shop. It was mostly the way she was dressed on a snowy day that had been, unfortunately, all too common in Boulder that particular winter.

She stood awkwardly just inside the door in her long cloth coat and pants which were crumpled over the tops of low-heeled shoes, not snow boots. Her head was uncovered and her hair was a nondescript color, something between light brown and blond. Her face was pale and drawn, the skin stretched tightly over bone. Good cheekbones. He couldn't tell the color of her eyes; she had dropped them to count the coins in her hand as she stepped forward into the line for coffee. It was a shop in which one served oneself from clean and shiny containers which offered a variety of brews, from French vanilla coffee mocha to dark Colombian to something called a Denver blend.

He would not have kept watching her except that Sandy was prattling on again about how well her interview had gone, and how sure she was that she was going to be the next Paseo girl, doing a series of auto commercials for a Denver television station. She probably would get the role. From time to time Paul glanced at her to

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simulate interest. Sandy was a very attractive blonde, tall and leggy, and her cheeks were currently flushed prettily from the cold and her enthusiasm for her own apparent good fortune.

The woman had gotten her coffee and was looking around a little shyly and discovering no place to sit—it was very crowded, as it usually was on a weekend, and very few chairs were provided. It was a shop that sold coffee by the pound and the machines dispensing the various flavors existed primarily for purposes of sampling. She put a plastic cover over the cup in her hand and prepared to take it with her.

Idly he watched her progress through the door and back into the cold. Through the window he saw her approach an older-model car.

"Paul, where are you going?"

He was out of his chair and the coffee shop in a moment.

The woman had fallen to her hands and knees and was staring in misery at the large brown stain smoking on the dirty ice and snow.

"Are you all right?"

He carefully knelt on his bad knees beside her, afraid to do more than ask. She should know if she were badly hurt or not.

"Paul?"

He could hear Sandy behind him.

"The coffee," the woman said desperately.

He helped her to her feet. He could see now that she was younger than he had at first thought, probably only a year or two older than himself. Despite the bulk of her coat, she seemed very thin. She steadied herself on the side of the car, which he noticed was filled with luggage and boxes.

"I'm all right," she said.

She didn't look all right. She looked paler than ever and was holding onto the car, which had Texas plates, as though it were a tree in a high wind.

"Don't go away," he said. "I'll get your coffee—"

He turned before she could make an objection and hurried back into the shop. Sandy followed.

"What do you think you're doing?" she asked, momentarily distracted from recounting her triumph of yesterday in the studio.

"What does it look like I'm doing? Mission of mercy."

"Really, Paul." Sandy's disapproval was clearly expressed by her tone.

He paid for the coffee and returned to the woman, who had managed to unlock the car and was sitting sideways in the front seat,

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brushing the snow from her pants. There was a small tear in one knee. The gloves she was wearing were cotton, and though it was now snowing only lightly, it was a very cold January day, and the cloth could offer her hands little protection. He realized that his discomfort had less to do with the cold than with her poverty. The quality of the expensive parka he was wearing now embarrassed him.

He handed her the coffee, and she sucked at it greedily. After a moment, she looked up at him, and he met her eyes with a sense of shock. They were green, green the way the sea is green before it breaks into deep water. He could see the tears of pain in them.

"Thank you," she said. "You're very kind."

"The least I could do for a fellow Texan."

Paul was starting to feel cold. Sandy had already retreated to the interior of the coffee shop.

The woman had dropped her eyes and continued to drink the coffee, but made no move to swing her legs inside and close the door of the car.

"Drive straight through?" It didn't look to him as though she could have afforded a night in a motel.

She nodded. "I am . . . relocating," she said. "Boulder is prosperous these days. Texas is not."

Her soft voice had more of a southern accent than the nasality he associated with west Texas, so it surprised him when she told him she was from San Angelo and had come to seek employment in Boulder. He doubted what she had told him. A woman her age was more likely to be running away from something than uprooting herself to seek an opportunity as vague as "prosperity."

He really was getting cold now. He glanced at the coffee shop and saw Sandy watching them through the window.

"You have a job here?"

"No, I'm looking. Will be looking," she amended.

Paul stamped his feet against the chill and dug into his parka pocket.

"Here's today's paper," he said. "For the classifieds," he explained. "I'm finished with it. Look, I have to get back."

"Thank you," she said, looking at him again with her arresting eyes as if she were faintly puzzled. "You've been very kind."

"I hope you like it here," he said and turned away, back to the warmth of the coffee shop and to deal with Sandy's displeasure. She

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had driven up from Denver to spend the weekend with him, and he supposed he should be more attentive.

"Finished playing Galahad to the homeless? I'm surprised you didn't offer to let her move in with you."

"I doubt she would have accepted the invitation," he said and realized that he thought that was probably true. Her voice had been educated, cultured. He didn't know any homeless people, but he didn't think they routinely sought Boulder in the winter. Or looked and sounded like that. "Lighten up. Like they say, 'A good deed a day keeps the chaplain at bay.' "

"You just made that up."

To mollify Sandy, he very carefully did not look in the direction of the parking lot again, and by the time they had finished their coffee and made their purchases and left, the car with the Texas plates was gone.

He didn't see the woman again until the next weekend. Sandy had landed the job representing the car dealership and had declined to come up. There were a dozen things she said she had to do before beginning a new job.

He hadn't pressed her. He and Sandy had been involved, lived together off and on, for two years, and he was very much aware that it was time either to ask her to marry him or to let them drift apart. Past time really. But he kept putting it off. He found her an agreeable enough companion, no more selfish than many girls her age, and she came from a good family—her father was a state senator whom Paul liked very much. The senator had a fine sense of humor and seemed to have no more expectations in a son-in-law than Paul could satisfy, even though Paul was almost ten years older than Sandy, his second daughter. Paul owned his own business and was reasonably successful, but he had reached his late thirties without feeling the necessity of a wife and family. From what he had read and what Sandy and his mother had told him, this made him a severe risk as a marriage partner. The older he got, the less flexible he would become, or so he had been told. After all, he didn't want to wind up all alone in life, did he?

Actually, he didn't mind very much being alone. He wasn't sure he was ready to endure the invasion of his privacy on a twenty-four-hour basis. He hadn't found it very tolerable the few times he had tried it. So he kept putting off asking Sandy to marry him.

Besides, he had read somewhere that you couldn't be really lonely anyway until you had loved hopelessly, desperately. As though that

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should reinforce his reluctance to marry Sandy or anyone else.

He had gone to the library that Saturday to return books which were sadly overdue. He was sure if he had kept track over the years he would have been better off buying books than using the library, since he invariably forgot when he should take the books back.

She was sitting in one of the reading areas, going through the newspaper.

"Settled in yet?" he asked.

Startled, she looked up at him with her wonderful eyes.

"Oh, hello." She didn't quite smile, but she didn't seem unfriendly.

"I'm the guy from the parking lot—"

"I remember," she said. "You bought me coffee and gave me your paper."

He dropped into a chair beside her.

"How's the job hunt going?"

"Not very well, I'm afraid. There aren't many jobs and the competition for them is fierce."

She was looking better. There was some color in her cheeks, and she was wearing some makeup. He thought her lashes were definitely darker; her mouth with color on it was larger, fuller than he remembered. But sitting there with her coat thrown to one side, he could see she was very thin.

"What do you do, or would do?"

"Office work, I suppose. A little typing, filing—"

"Can you use a ten-key?"

"Yes, but I'm a little rusty."

"If you haven't yet eaten, let me buy you lunch. It's possible I might have something for you. My girl—that is, my office manager—is going out on maternity leave shortly, and I have to find a replacement for her. We make prestressed concrete products. I can't pay a great deal—"

"I've discovered that no one in Boulder *has* to pay a great deal." She smiled. "Fine. Yes, I'd be delighted to have lunch with you. My name is Margaret Detweiler."

"Paul Honecker." He was relieved she hadn't taken offense at his calling Mac his "girl." He knew Mac would have savaged him for doing so. He wondered how many other violations of EEOC he could pile up over lunch. He wasn't used to interviewing people. Fortunately, he didn't have to very often. He just sent them to Mac, who took care of replacing what little turnover they had at the plant.

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He took her to lunch at Tom's Tavern, which he assured her had the best hamburgers in Boulder. Over lunch she told him she was recently divorced and was just coming back into the job market after not working for several years. She had no children. She had some letters of reference but they testified more to her character, she was afraid, than her capabilities in the office. Her experience was limited to having helped her husband for a few years when he had first set up his practice. He was a CPA, and she had some familiarity with tax problems and the various forms required by the government to operate a small business.

She spoke slowly and carefully, as though she were unused to speaking about herself. She accepted his offer of a beer, but she didn't finish it. She ate, however, with great enthusiasm and readily accepted his offer of coffee and dessert.

He asked her to come to the plant on Monday to meet Mary MacPherson, "Mac," whom everyone who worked there, he most of all, was afraid of being without for the next six weeks. Mac would have the final say on her replacement since it was she who would have to do the training.

He drew her a map. The plant was on the Foothills Highway to Lyons about five miles north of Boulder on the right-hand side of the road. She could see the piles of concrete products from the road, mostly the cisterns. She couldn't miss it. If it was a clear day, she could follow the cyclists. The hilly stretch of highway between Boulder and Lyons was popular for both racers in training and recreational riders.

"What do you think?" he asked Mac after her interview of Margaret Detweiler on the following Monday.

Mac shifted uncomfortably in the chair behind the metal desk in the trailer that functioned as an office for them both. She was a very large woman who was also very pregnant.

"I liked her. She has a degree in history from the University of Texas, fat lot of good it'll do her. She seems intelligent, and hopefully that means she can learn quickly. On the down side, she doesn't have much experience, is an awful typist, but not too bad on the ten-key. I don't think she'd know double-entry bookkeeping if she fell over it, but then neither do I. Anyway, that's what you pay Ron for every week. She's a helluva lot better than most of those bimbos who've been dragging in here for the past two weeks. I say, let's give her a chance but not dwell on it if she's a mistake."

She shoved a single sheet of paper at him.

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"Here's her application."

He took it and glanced over it.

"It doesn't even say how old she is," he complained.

"You're not *allowed* to ask." Mac glared at him with that look that said, You don't know anything. He was fairly accustomed to it.

He helped himself to the lotion from the bottle she kept on her desk. The skin of his hands was always cracked and sometimes bleeding from the work and the cold. This was no white-collar job he had fashioned for himself. Fortunately, the plant was now in its slow period; the timing of Mac's pregnancy was miraculous. By the time business picked up in the spring, Mac should be ready to come back to work.

He tossed the application back on her desk.

"You're the boss," he said, feeling as pleased with himself as Willie looked when he brought an especially succulent field mouse through the cat door and into the living room.

"She doesn't have a phone, but I told her to call me back late this afternoon. Let's get her started right away. I don't know how long this kid is going to stay in the oven, and if Maggie doesn't work out, we're going to have to scramble for a replacement."

Paul thought that Mac should know. She was experienced in these matters. She was Catholic and already had two at home.

"Maggie?"

"That's what I call her. She said she answers to almost anything."

He left Maggie in Mac's capable hands and drove to Texas. It was his mother's birthday, and she was attaining an age that required the obeisance of her only child. He drove because he hated to fly and liked to drive. Actually, flying terrified him. And he liked driving at speed. He had been a downhill racer after a stint in Nam, qualifying for CU's ski team before he wrecked his knees.

His mother lived in the hill country north of Austin, and if he really pushed the Porsche he could make it in just under fifteen hours. Mile after mile of land lying hard and dry beneath the cold sky slipped by until the ground began to roll under scrub brush and cactus. At this time of year it was a long barren haul, but he had long ago ceased much to notice the country through which he was driving. He found his thoughts going back to Maggie Detweiler, his new hire.

What kind of life had she had that had disappointed her enough to abandon it?

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At some point in his dash across west Texas he was almost surprised to see the city limits sign of San Angelo. Yet this was the route he always took when he drove to his mother's. He tried to remember what was on Maggie's application. What was the street?

Rialto. That was it. And the number?

He tried to concentrate. He was curious to see the place that she had fled. He supposed her ex-husband still lived there.

403. It was the last three digits of his matriculation number at the University of Colorado, where he had collected a degree in mechanical engineering when he wasn't spending his time on the ski slopes.

He slowed the car through the old town, which lay tiredly under a pale sun. This was the place she said had been her home for so many years. He turned on Rialto and drifted down it until he found the number.

It was a street of large old houses that had once reflected the pride and prosperity of their owners. No longer. Paint was peeling, porches were sagging. Some windows were boarded.

403 Rialto did look more prosperous than the rest. The paint was good, the yard was neat. There was a sign in the window: Rooms by the month or by the week.

There was a woman in the yard, bundled up against the cold, frowning at some plants with plastic sacks over them. She stared at him when he rolled down the window to get a better look.

"Help you?" she asked.

He switched off the engine, got out of the car, and stretched. It seemed as cold as Colorado with the wind blowing as hard as it was, though there was no snow whitening the stiff grass.

"I think I must be mistaken. I thought someone I know used to live here. Maggie Detweiler?"

"Might have lived here. She do something she shouldn't?"

He saw now that the woman's face wore its lines with borderline hostility, her cheeks blotched pink with the cold.

"Not that I know of. She's just gone to work for me in Boulder. She said she used to live here. I'm on my way to Austin. I thought I'd stop by."

She nodded as though that were a perfectly normal thing for him to do. She spoke as if she were used to giving references. "Did live here. For almost two months. Nice woman. Glad she found work. Seemed real respectable. Very quiet."

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The woman shivered against the bitter wind. She said she didn't think Mrs. Detweiler could find work in San Angelo. Things were really tight there since the oil bust. One day she just picked up her mail, packed up, and left. Didn't owe any rent though. No, she had no idea where she was from. Mrs. Detweiler didn't talk about herself.

The woman seemed to want to talk to him further, but a gust of frigid air drove her scuttling back to the warmth of the house, and he gratefully slipped back behind the wheel.

He was puzzled and a little angry. Margaret Detweiler had lied on her application for employment. She had listed no address previous to the one in San Angelo. He'd have to talk to Mac about her when he got back.

A week later he was sitting across from her.

"And I'm telling you I don't feel so good these days, Paul, and I doubt you've got time to replace Maggie."

"Oh, come on, Mac. She lied. For all you know she's a serial killer, a felon wanted in three states."

"Or maybe her ex-husband is harassing her," Mac said. "There are all kinds of reasons why she might not want to be entirely candid. She did use the same name—"

"I don't believe this," he said irritably. "Just look at the way she dresses. That was a cashmere sweater she had on this morning. Those clothes are expensive."

"So they are, but they're not new."

"They were new once! She's hardly your average office worker."

"Well, neither am I. It seems to me she's just someone fallen on hard times, and hasn't given you the satisfaction of complaining about them. I like the woman, apart from the fact that she drinks more coffee than all the rest of us put together, and I'm not having you roar back in here with a burr under your blanket and run her off!"

"Burr under—"

"Oh, it's the unwholesome influence of working around a Texan. You know what I mean. There may be a perfectly reasonable explanation. Why don't you just ask her when she comes back from making the deposit instead of being sulky?"

"I intend to."

"Do it by yourself then. I've got a doctor's appointment this afternoon, and I've got to get out of here. But I don't want to come in tomorrow morning and find this desk empty. You be nice!"

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Mac then left, less because she wanted to be early for her appointment, he decided, than to avoid being in on the interview with Margaret Detweiler. Which was not like Mac, who usually thrived on confrontation.

The drivers and loaders had also departed. The afternoon was snowy and further work could be put off until tomorrow when it was supposed to be sunny and mild.

He asked Maggie to come in and sit in the chair across the desk from him.

He told her about going through San Angelo on his trip to Texas. She said nothing, gazing with her wonderful eyes out the window at the empty yard in which new snow was being whirled about in a gusty wind.

When she continued to say nothing as he went over the importance of a work history, or failing that, a personal history, he became irritated. "So you admit you lied? You hadn't lived in San Angelo forever—"

She looked at him then. "Who lives anywhere forever?"

"I mean, where did you live before?" He felt he was losing his concentration and control of the conversation.

"That is not relevant to my working here," she said softly. "I am no criminal. I am fleeing no bench warrant."

He felt helpless in the face of her implacability.

Then she looked unhappy and seemed to regret his distress. She rose and came around the desk. She looked down at him and took his hand as though he were the one at a disadvantage, the one who needed comfort.

"You have been very kind to me," she said and held the back of his rough hand against the softness of her sweater.

After a moment he got to his feet, pulled down the shade, and locked the door.

Later, after she had gone, he realized that he had done one of the monumentally stupid things in his life, and he thought he surely was going to be made to regret it.

Though he dreaded seeing her the next morning at work, she was as collected and impersonal as ever. And Mac was delighted with him on finding that she was still there.

He left work that afternoon thinking he had gotten away with one and was very pleased with himself. He fed Willie, fielded a couple of messages from Sandy that said she would be in touch, turned on the television, and then felt very much alone. He felt his

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loneliness as though it was so much empty space stretching away on all sides of him. It made him unhappy and restless.

He drove by the house in which Margaret Detweiler said she had taken a room, then stopped and asked her to dinner. Afterwards he took her back to his house, where he ignored other messages from Sandy. Maggie said she had paid for her room until the end of the month, but seemed pleased that he had asked her to stay with him. She said that she thought there would be fewer complications if she did not.

He had to leave the Porsche off for servicing after his trip to Texas and asked her to give him a ride to and from work the next day. Mac wouldn't be coming in again. She said she was due at any moment, and even the short ride out of town to the plant, she asserted, could be hazardous to herself and her incipient offspring. Maggie was now in charge, although Mac's help was only a telephone call away.

Maggie picked him up at the service center in her old car, which was very clean inside and uncluttered except for a cheap plastic holder for cups which straddled the hump of the transmission. She confessed that she drank coffee constantly, continually, as much and as often as she could afford. Free coffee at work was a substantial benefit as far as she was concerned, though it didn't obviate the need for making a pot as soon as she got up.

The day was as warm and sunny as predicted, and as was predictable, they passed a number of cyclists on their way to work, even though it was only a little before nine in the morning. They saw one in an orange jersey pulling away from a pack of five.

"The orange flash on the zebra-striped bike," Paul said. "You can almost set your watch by him. Out in the morning, back by three."

"So Mac has said. I guess the racers have to take advantage of what good weather they have. You wonder how they earn a living."

"That particular guy is a semi-pro," Paul said, "and still in school, I think. He was written up a few months back in one of the national magazines. Prototype of the new American cyclist. A good bet to make the 7-Eleven team."

She nodded and sipped her coffee, putting the cup into its holder with a graceful motion as they swung into the plant. He had never seen her make an awkward move after that first day in the parking lot.

Later in the day, she asked if they might leave a bit earlier than they had planned to pick up his car. She said she had some errands

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she had to run. Dick Hanson, Paul's foreman, said he'd lock up the office for her.

So they left the plant a few minutes before three. He teased her about the omnipresent cup in her hand, and she told him that certainly she was an addict, but that except for increasing the risk of pancreatic cancer, it was a relatively harmless vice.

She seemed very gay to him that afternoon, very lighthearted, and it pleased him to be with her.

It was a wonderful day to live in Boulder. The sun was bright on the snowy fields, the sky was clear and very blue, the road was dry. Ahead of them, slowly pumping up the hill, was the cyclist in the orange jersey. It was perfect Boulder, he thought. They could put it on a calendar.

Maggie was drinking her coffee. As she reached down to place the cup in the holder, it toppled to the side. She gave a cry as the coffee spilled across his feet and grabbed for the cup, wrenching the steering wheel with her other hand as she ducked her head.

What happened next was very clear to him, although he didn't remember the sound the cyclist made as the car struck him at fifty miles per hour. Paul saw a flash of orange, the windshield shatter, then saw the cyclist cartwheeling down the slope, feet still in their metal shells, locked onto the pedals, until he and his bicycle slammed into the barbed-wire fence at the bottom.

Somehow Paul helped her keep the car upright until they could bounce it to a stop at a crazy angle on the side of the hill. He got out and scrambled down over the icy rocks to where he could see that the wire had almost decapitated the cyclist. There was more blood than he thought possible melting the snow under the fence, and the man's closed gray face beneath the helmet already possessed the look of secret knowledge that Paul had seen on other dead. He didn't touch the body, but painfully made his way up the slope where he could hear Maggie being sick.

Then other cars stopped, and a police car, and finally an ambulance.

She was arrested immediately, probably, Paul thought, because of the sight of the slaughter on the fence, even though the cyclist had almost certainly been dead when he hit it.

He called his lawyer, who arranged for bail. Vehicular homicide Paul thought a very serious charge for someone who had spilled a cup of coffee. But a death had been the result of that, and the Boulder

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court was very sensitive to the large cycling population, which had been outraged at the accident.

In the end, Maggie was sentenced to thirty days in jail, a sentence which the judge suspended in return for forty hours of community service. Paul's lawyer told him that she had been lucky. It could have been far worse had Paul not been there for her as her employer, and had she had a prior record.

Maggie had that pale, haunted look that he hated while she was going through the maw of the legal system, but once it was over, she seemed to become herself again, growing stronger and more confident each day. "Community service," she reported, at this time of year largely consisted of picking up trash blown about the city and county. She performed this estimable service on weekends and three evenings after work.

It was while she was finishing her sentence that Dick threw his back out and couldn't attend the Concrete Conference in Houston as planned. Paul's foreman's tickets were paid for, as was his room, and fees for the conference. Paul grudgingly agreed to go. There was too much information concerning new products and applications of same to let it go until next year. He would have to fly. There wasn't time to drive; besides, he had spent enough hours recently on lonely roads.

Fortified with Dramamine and a few scotches, he got through the flight and spent the next two days being inundated with information. His hotel room was piled high with handouts; catalogues, articles, and advertising of all sorts. After days crammed with meetings, cocktail parties, and banquets, the organizers planned a break in the schedule, freeing the participants for a day of needed relaxation and sight-seeing. Since Paul had seen all he had ever wanted to of Houston in years past, he rented a car and drove to Corpus Christi.

He drove south mainly to be driving, and it felt good to be out of the hotel and on the road again, but he also drove because he wanted some time to think over the events of the past month, about which he had become uneasy.

By now Maggie was spending most of the time she wasn't patrolling the county for litter with Paul. In the last few weeks she had seemed more relaxed and open to him, showing an interest in scores of things he had not paid much attention to before, being clever, being alive, being Maggie. She was a beautiful woman and a generous lover, and Paul thought himself very lucky.

Except for his unease.

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He had seen Maggie time and again put down that coffee cup in the car without spilling a drop. It troubled him enough to cause him to drive south to Corpus Christi, which the article in the Boulder newspaper had listed as the home of Bobby Cremmins, the cyclist who had died.

He didn't know what he expected to find there. He had talked to Cremmins's roommate in Boulder, who had said he didn't really know very much about him. Cremmins didn't have any close friends that he knew of in Boulder. He had divided his time between training and the business school at the university. He had no girlfriend in particular. He was very "focused," his roommate had said. The roommate expressed no sorrow or regret at Cremmins's death. He said he thought Cremmins's parents were dead but that he had an uncle in Texas. He didn't think they corresponded much. Paul had left him uneasier than ever.

Paul had gone to the library and looked up the article that he had remembered in the national magazine. It wasn't very long or very informative. Cremmins had grown up in Corpus Christi, gone to the University of Houston, and come to Boulder to train while he attended CU's business school. The article was short and described Cremmins as ambitious and dedicated to his sport.

From what little information Paul had amassed, Bobby Cremmins didn't seem like a very likable fellow. He supposed few really dedicated types were. Not a reason to get himself killed. Besides, Maggie could hardly have had time to meet Bobby Cremmins in Boulder, let alone know him well enough to be offended by him. If there was any connection between them, it would have to be in Texas.

He found several Cremminses in the Corpus Christi telephone directory. Two were out, and the third had never heard of Bobby Cremmins. Not knowing what else to do, he drove by one of the addresses in an older neighborhood of small houses more than a mile from the gulf, yet having the damp, slightly decayed look that comes from living near a large body of salt water.

A. Cremmins still wasn't home, but one of the neighbors was and told him that Al Cremmins operated the service station a few blocks away. From Al Cremmins, who was busy trying to resuscitate an older car, and who was not especially communicative, he learned that Bobby Cremmins had been his nephew and an arrogant S.O.B.

He asked Al Cremmins if he knew Margaret Detweiler, but the man shook his head in dismissal and went back to work on the car, which looked sorely in need of his services.

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Paul looked in the telephone directory under CPAs and found one Edward Detweiler. It was a name he hadn't really wanted to find. It disquieted him. He looked at it a long time before he punched the number. He was able to make an appointment with Detweiler that afternoon on a "tax matter." Paul thought that at this time of year the man probably didn't have time for personal matters.

He ate a tasteless lunch, drove part way to Padre Island under a lowering sky the color of ashes, then went to his appointment with Edward Detweiler, who suggested that he call him Ed.

Detweiler's offices were impressive, with a lot of plants and glass, and were staffed with mostly harried-looking men in shirt sleeves and a few intense young women hunched over adding machines and computers. Detweiler himself was no longer young. Paul would have put him at least ten years older than himself, but he was a well-dressed, handsome man with steel-rimmed glasses and a full head of graying hair which he wore a little longer than was fashionable. He greeted Paul in a private office and closed the door, to simulate, Paul supposed, confidentiality in tax matters, even though the work would doubtless be assigned to one or more of the industrious young people in the next room.

"I confess I don't have any tax problems, Mr. Detweiler—Ed. I'm really here to see you about Margaret."

"Margaret?" The man leaned forward. "Is she all right? Nobody here has heard from her in months. Where is she?"

Paul was disconcerted. He didn't know what he had expected from Detweiler, but it was not the genuine concern the man was projecting across his expensive desk. And Paul was at a loss as to how much he should tell Maggie's ex-husband.

"She's fine," Paul said. "She has a job, and she's doing fine."

The man leaned back, nodding as if relieved. "What is your interest in Margaret?" he asked.

"I'm her employer. I'm curious about her. She just appeared on our doorstep one day—"

Paul explained about his attending the conference in Houston, his free day, trying to make his inquiries sound as natural and casual as possible.

"Why did she leave Corpus?" Paul asked.

"Her daughter died." The man looked at him as though he needed to have Paul understand. He made a steeple of his fingers. He had beautiful hands, long and well shaped. His nails were polished.

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"Karen was in the hospital a long time, over eleven months. She was unconscious the whole time. The press called her the Sleeping Beauty, but she wasn't; she wasn't even pretty after a while. Her face had lost its character. Everyone told Margaret to let her go. But Margaret wouldn't let her go. She went every day to the hospital. *Every day* for eleven months." He paused, as if remembering.

"She divorced me because I didn't share her obsession. I couldn't. No one could. 'She's not your daughter,' she would say. She wasn't, but Karen was like my daughter. I married Margaret when Karen was twelve. Karen's father had been a colonel in the army and died in Viet Nam. Colonel Jack Brand. Karen never forgot him even though she was only five when he was killed. Wouldn't let me adopt her. Wouldn't hear of it. Wanted to keep her own name and so forth. A stubborn girl, much like her mother."

"What happened?" Paul asked. "Why was Karen in the hospital?"

He wondered how far he could go without exciting any hostility in the man, but Detweiler seemed willing enough to talk about his family's tragedy to a stranger.

The man waved his hand. "Auto accident. She had been to a party. There had been a lot of drinking. Her date drove them from the party even though he probably shouldn't have. She scarcely knew the boy. He said Karen made him pull over so that she could drive. Then they were going too fast for conditions. It had been raining. That's what the report of the officer on the scene said. Hit a tree."

He shrugged. "Karen becomes comatose, a vegetable, and this other kid walks away. It was terrible for Margaret. Then some idiot cop told her that he thought Karen had been the passenger in the car and not the driver, and that the boy had changed places with her and put her behind the wheel after they hit the tree. Because he had been drinking, you see. Thought so because of the nature of Karen's injuries and so forth. Karen did have a broken neck and any movement might very well have severed her spine. Well, it was severed. But so what if it were true? There were no witnesses to the accident. There wasn't any way to prove it. Do you think it made us feel better to suspect that the boy Karen was with might have aggravated her injuries? The police questioned him and let him go."

Paul was cold. He thought the air conditioning must be on even though it was a blustery day in late February.

"Dumb cop." Ed Detweiler pronounced sentence on the man.

"The insurance money ran out, Margaret paid out her own money until she didn't have any left, then they moved Karen to a veteran's

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hospital where she died a few days after she was taken off life support. Should have done it much earlier, but Margaret wouldn't stand for it. She can be a very obstinate woman. Then it was out of her hands."

"Margaret left Corpus?"

"Right after Karen's funeral. Threw some things in a car and took off to I don't know where." He hunched forward as if he were pleading a case. "We all still care about Margaret, all her friends care what happens to her. But nobody here has heard from her."

"And the boy? What was the name of the boy Karen was with in the accident?"

As if he didn't know. But he had to hear it, didn't he?

"Not likely to forget, am I? It was Cremmins. Bobby, I think. He's a bicycle racer. Was a racer, I should say. I read the other day where he had gotten himself killed. Local paper carried the blurb. I think he still has an uncle who lives here."

Paul thanked Ed Detweiler and drove back to Houston. He went through the motions of another day of the conference, collected all the collectibles, then took a Dramamine and flew back to Denver fortified with many scotches.

Maggie picked him up at ten o'clock that night at the Boulder motel where the shuttle from the Denver airport had deposited him. By then the things that had been so clear to him on the plane had become very confused. Sometimes he thought that she had used the time in San Angelo to put a buffer between herself and Corpus Christi. Probably to get a driver's license with a San Angelo address, so that there would be no obvious connection between her and the cyclist. Or sometimes he thought that it could have been a place in which she meant to begin a new life. But then again, he was afraid that she had used him, had made him her witness, her accomplice to murder. Or had she? Could it have been an accident?

Before she undressed him and put him to bed he told her he had been to Corpus Christi and that they had to talk. But when he awoke the next morning feeling awful, mostly because of the drugs and drink, but partly because Willie was battering him in the forehead, she was gone. Her clothes were gone, her cosmetics were gone. There was no note.

She was not at the rooming house. She was not at the plant.

He remembered later that when he had returned home that day he had drawn himself into a ball in the middle of the living room, feeling the emptiness stretch out on all sides of him, seemingly

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forever. The sense of loss was crushing, the punishment completely out of proportion to his crime.

Which was what? He had gone to Corpus Christi.

She had spilled a cup of coffee.

It was almost a year later that the telephone rang sometime after midnight, creating the sense of alarm such calls always engender. It was he who answered it.

"I wanted you to know that I'm all right," she said.

He fought off sleep. There were a hundred things he had dreamed he would say to her if he ever heard from her again. They vanished before the reality. He had worried about her. Worried that he would pick up the paper one day and read that another woman on the side of the road had fallen victim to some random predator. Or that she was injured and needed his help. Or wanted him and couldn't reach him. Or—

"I did worry," he said. "We never talked. You just left."

"I either had to go or stay there forever," she said. "Somehow, staying forever didn't seem very fair. Anyway, I like it here even though it rains a lot. I'm with someone who is very kind to me. I just wanted you to know."

He stared at the receiver after she had broken the connection.

"Who was that?" Sandy asked sleepily. "Was that her?"

He slid down beneath the covers but he was no longer sleepy. He put his hand over his wife's abdomen where he could feel the baby move. Willie stirred irritably at the foot of the bed.

"Yes," he said. "She's all right. That's why she called."

"Good," she said. "Finally."

She said it as though she had been expecting the call, and he supposed she had. He had shared with her his concern for Maggie, the woman she had seen on that snowy day, and who had worked for him, had been in the accident, and then had disappeared. He sometimes wondered how much she had guessed about their relationship.

"I always wondered if she knew the guy." He heard her yawn, her voice furry on the edge of sleep. "You know, the one that was killed? Even though it was an accident. They were both from Texas, and I thought maybe that's why she left Boulder the way she did."

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He drew his wife to him and told her the lie he had practiced over and over during those nights in which he had felt the margins of the space around him spread out beyond imagination, and which he had come to believe.

"No," he said, "I don't think so."

DETECTIVERSE

WEIRD WILLIE

by CHARLENE MORGENSTERN

Willie, just to settle a score,
Nailed his sister to a door.
Said his Dad, a little quaint,
"Where'd you get the pretty paint?"

He had a brother, five years old,
Let him freeze out in the cold.
Propped him up, out in the shed,
Willie likes his brother dead.

Willie like a big bad bear,
Pushed his Aunty down the stair.
Said his Mom, acting silly,
Now you've widowed Uncle Billy.

Willie burned the little shanty,
In it was his dear old granny.
Grandpa got so very mad,
He up and thrashed our Willie, bad.

Willie said,"You go to Hell,"
And Grandpa threw him down the well.
He screamed and screamed all night and day.
But Mom and Dad had moved away.

Grandpa felt so very sad,
For he had loved that Willie lad.
And from that well there grew for all to see,
A weeping, Willie, Willow Tree.

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Betty Rowlands came to crime writing after a career writing instructional materials for students of English as a second language. But already she has produced a number of notable stories and books. She debuted in 1988 with an award-winning short story which EQMM *reprinted this year. 1993 will see the publication of her fourth novel in both the U.K. and the U.S. (*Exhaustive Enquiries/*Walker & Co.).*

LOOKING ON THE BRIGHT SIDE

by BETTY ROWLANDS

Vince was out when I phoned so I left a message on his answering machine. He called back a couple of hours later.

"Pete? Is something wrong?"

"Why should there be?"

"You said you had something on your mind."

He didn't sound quite himself. I thought, Maybe he has problems of his own. His career has been one huge success story, but I've often heard him say it isn't always wine and roses.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you," I said. "It's simply . . . I'd like your advice . . . as an old friend and fellow writer. Is it okay if I call round?"

"Sure." He sounded relaxed again. "Come for a bite of supper. I'm doing sweet-and-sour pork, there's plenty for two."

"I'll do that—thanks."

Vince and I have known one another since our college days. He's never married. Not that he's gay; far from it. He just prefers to "eat à la carte" as he puts it—quite an apt turn of phrase, seeing how many dishy birds he's pulled in his time. He's a handsome bastard, the bronzed, muscular type they all seem to go for.

I picked up a bottle of wine at the off-licence before going to Vince's flat. It's pretty swish, all custom-made furniture and David Hockney originals. He makes a fortune from writing TV soaps and commercials. Mind you, I could churn out that sort of crap just as

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well as he does—better, in fact, if I do say so myself—only my literary aspirations have until now been a bit higher. Not that this has paid off in worldly terms, if you get my meaning. Trying to get a decent advance for a serious novel is like milking a plastic cow, but I don't complain. I've always been one for looking on the bright side.

Vince came to the door wearing a cook's apron over his designer slacks and surrounded by a whiff of onions and garlic. "Pete, old son, good to see you!" he said, with a flash of porcelain-capped teeth. His eye lighted on the bottle. "Come and pour some snorts while I get on with the stir-fry."

I followed him into the kitchen, drew the cork, and filled a couple of glasses. We said cheers and drank.

"Mm, that's a nice one," said Vince. He put down his glass and began slicing carrots, his back towards me. Under the close-fitting knitted shirt I could see the movement of his shoulder blades. "Evelyn gone out this evening?" he asked casually.

"She's away at the moment."

"Oh, right." He picked up a courgette and started work on it. Chop, chop, chop went the knife, pivoting up and down on its point. It looked lethally sharp, but he handled it like a professional. Food is his hobby. I munched a piece of celery and watched, fascinated.

Vince tipped the vegetables into a pan of hot oil and swished them around with chopsticks. With his spare hand he drained his glass and held it out in my direction. I gave him a refill.

We ate facing one another across the limewood kitchen table. I wasn't very hungry, but the food was really good and I tried my best to do it justice. I said, "If you ever get fed up with writing you can get a job as a chef."

He looked pleased as he lifted his glass in acknowledgement. "So, how can I help you?"

I'd thought very carefully about what I was going to say. I put down my fork and said, "It's time I made some money. Real money, not the peanuts my books have brought in so far."

He raised an eyebrow. "I thought you were doing all right. Wasn't your last novel short-listed for some award or other?"

I laughed, a little bitterly. "Oh sure. If you measure success in terms of critical acclaim, *Night Follows Morning* was a wow. The trouble is, hardly anyone actually bought the bloody thing. I just about clawed back the advance."

"I bought it. I even read it. Didn't really understand it, mind." Vince gave what romantic novelists described as an impish grin.

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I've seen quite sensible, mature women turn gooey as butterscotch sauce under its impact. "Anyway," he went on, "you've always said you're not interested in making a fortune."

"I'm not, not for myself. It's Evelyn. You were right. There is a problem."

The grin faded. "What sort of problem?"

I swallowed hard. It was all I could do to get the words out. "Got herself pregnant, didn't she?"

Vince's jaw dropped. He took a pull from his glass, wiped his mouth with his napkin, and said, "Are you sure?"

"Positive." I waited for a moment and then said, "It isn't mine."

"Pete, I'm so sorry." He looked genuinely concerned.

"I suppose it's partly my fault," I said. Vince, temporarily rendered speechless by another mouthful of wine, made swimming movements with his free hand and shook his head in contradiction. "Oh yes," I insisted. "We always seem to be short of cash and I spend too much time holed up in my study. I've neglected her, haven't I?"

Vince reached for the bottle and topped up his glass. He went to do the same for me but I waved him away. "I don't know what to say," he muttered. "I had no idea."

"Neither had I until I heard her puking in the bathroom three mornings in a row." I looked him straight in the eye. "Vince, you're an old friend and I need your help."

He looked puzzled. "You've lost me. You hinted it was about your writing. . . ."

"It is. I've decided to write a crime novel. It's mayhem and murder that bring in the big bucks, isn't it?"

"Ye . . . es, I suppose so. Bit of a comedown for you, though."

"Not necessarily. This will be an in-depth study of the psychology of a killer. I'm going to write from his point of view, live with him, share his thoughts and emotions from the day he realises what he has to do right up to the moment he confronts his victim. You see, Vince, this affair of Evelyn's has made me understand what drives a man to commit the ultimate crime."

I must have sounded quite intense, because he gave me a very strange look and got up from the table. He glanced over his shoulder once or twice as he filled the *cafetière* and got out cups and saucers. "Black or white?" he said.

"Black, please."

He filled two cups, put them on the table, and sat down again. He fiddled with the sugar spoon, took a sip of coffee that appeared to burn his mouth, ran his fingers through his hair.

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"Look, Pete," he said. "You seem a bit overwrought, and it's easy to understand in the circumstances. If you're strapped for cash . . . for the operation, I mean . . . you can count on me for a loan."

"Operation?"

For a moment, he looked almost embarrassed. "To terminate the pregnancy," he said gruffly.

"Oh, that." I put sugar in my coffee and stirred it. "That wasn't what I had in mind at all. Anyway, it's already been taken care of." I shut my eyes for a moment. It had been messy and I didn't want to think about it. "I want your help with the book."

"But I'm not a crime writer, Pete."

"I know that." I took a sip of coffee and felt better. "Boy, that's good," I said.

"Costa Rican," he said absently, and waited.

"Do you remember," I said, "when we were at college, we once had to write an essay about 'the anatomy of fear'?"

He frowned. "Vaguely. Weird sort of topic . . . but as I remember, we had a weird old tutor. What was his name, now?"

"O'Halloran. Very excitable. Always banging on about how writers handle emotion."

"That's the feller." Vince half smiled, then the puzzled look returned. "What's this got to do with . . . ?"

"I'm coming to that. Before tackling that essay, I wanted to know exactly what it felt like to be shit-scared, so I talked you into holding my head under water as if you were trying to drown me."

Recollection dawned in his eyes and he gave a shout of laughter. "I remember!" he exclaimed. "I thought you were out of your mind, but somehow you talked me into it. And then, after dunking you in the bath, I got a bit carried away." He slammed the table with the flat of his hand as laughter threatened to overwhelm him. "I . . . ho ho! . . . picked you up by your collar . . . and the seat of your pants . . . and made as if I was going to throw you out of the window." He flung himself back in his chair, nearly helpless with mirth. "You were yelling blue murder and clinging to the sill . . . as if you really believed I was going to let go."

I thought he'd never stop laughing. It was a kind of hysteria. I pretended to join in, although it hadn't seemed at all funny at the time—and it seemed even less funny now.

"My God," he gasped when he'd got his wind back, "the bizarre things we got up to when we were students! We must have been stoned out of our minds."

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"It did the trick, didn't it?" I said, a little smugly, while Vince mopped his eyes. "I was scared half to death, but I got alpha plus for that essay." I leaned back in my chair. The adrenaline had started to pump like crazy. "So now," I went on, "I'm going to do a similar experiment . . . and that, my old friend, is where you come in."

"I don't follow you," he said. "What do you want me to do?"

"You don't have to *do* anything," I said softly. "You've done enough already."

"What are you driving at?" He wasn't smiling anymore and his voice had developed a tremor.

"I told you," I said, and my own voice was none too steady. "My new novel is to be written from the killer's viewpoint, so I have to know what a killer feels like, what goes through his mind as he comes face to face with his victim."

Now I really had him worried and the realisation gave me a great surge of pleasure. I felt exhilarated, all-powerful. I was lighter than air, I could fly out of the window if I wanted to, soar over the rooftops, climb to the stars. I was about to destroy the man who had blown my life apart. I leapt to my feet and went for the jugular.

The cunning bastard had read my mind. Or maybe, while he was making the coffee, he'd noticed that the knife was missing. His reactions always were quick, but this time they must have broken the light barrier. Next thing I knew, I was on my back with the heavy table on top of me and my arm numb from the karate chop that sent my weapon spinning from my hand.

I'm writing this from the hospital wing. They say I've got two broken ribs and severe internal bruising. I keep telling the policemen who come to ask me boring questions that I intend to bring charges against Vince of assault and causing me actual bodily harm, but they just laugh. It seems unfair when you take into account that *I* didn't give *him* so much as a scratch, and yet they're going to throw the book at me. Vince always did come off best, damn him.

Still, Evelyn got her comeuppance, didn't she? It's a pity I wasn't able to bring off the double, but you can't have everything. As I mentioned, I always try to look on the bright side, and the good news is that I'll have plenty of time—several years, my lawyer has given me to understand—to get on with my novel without having to worry about money or what to have for the next meal. It's going to be the best thing I've ever written.

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Best-known as an author of western novels, including the recently published The Payback, *James A. Ritchie makes a venture into the crime field here with a story that first came to him as the plot for a modern western novel. In this short version, the tale is a most entertaining crime story . . .*

THE REAL WEST

by JAMES A. RITCHIE

I've been a professional writer for ten years, but I still haven't learned to enjoy book tours. Perhaps I'd feel differently were my name Stephen King, and if the talk shows my agent booked me on included *The Tonight Show*, or *Good Morning, America*. I am not, however, Stephen King, and the shows I am graced to appear on usually air at three in the morning and have an audience of several dozen. I guess that's what comes from writing westerns instead of horror novels.

Still, I do enjoy the book signings. Not that I like writing my name over and over. It's the fans who buy the books that I like. I think I've made more lasting friends from lines at the bookstores than anywhere else.

On this tour, though, a few of the fans were a bit on the strange side.

One fan who was . . . different . . . was a sweet little old lady who asked if I really knew Wild Bill Hickok or Billy the Kid. "No, ma'am," I said. "I'm afraid they were a little before my time."

"That's silly," she answered. "They visit me almost every night. You should come over and meet them sometime."

Her face and the tone of her voice left no doubt that she was serious. Not knowing exactly how to reply, I signed the novel she handed me and mumbled that I might do that if I ever had a free night. She went away smiling, so I guess my answer was the right one.

Two or three times in the next few hours an oddball on the order of the little old lady came into the store and bought one of my books.

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The truth is, it didn't bother me. To the contrary, I found these people somewhat entertaining. And anything capable of entertaining me while on tour is something I welcome.

But not long before closing another fan came in, and at first I took him for just another oddball of the same sort. That impression didn't last long.

He was a man of medium height, built for speed rather than power, and his young, pimply face was adorned by a long, handlebar moustache. He was also dressed like a cowboy.

No, that isn't quite right. *I* was dressed like a cowboy. He was dressed like a Hollywood gunfighter.

The difference is obvious to anyone who knows the real Old West from the Hollywood fantasy. I wore plain brown cowboy boots, scuffed around the toe and a bit down at heel from walking. My pants were faded Levi's, my shirt flannel, and my hat a low-crowned Stetson.

This guy (from top to bottom) wore a Stetson big enough to take a bath in, a "western" shirt with fancy embroidery and leather cuffs, and brand new Levi's tucked into a pair of boots that must have cost five hundred dollars, not counting the fancy silver toe guards.

But his attire aside, he bought a copy of my latest novel, *The Payback,* and handed it across the table. "Just write 'to Billy,' " he said.

"Not Billy the Kid, by any chance?" I asked. I was smiling when I asked, but he took me seriously.

"Bill Bonney," he said. "I don't much like being called 'Kid.' Guess I can't blame folks, though."

"Surely that isn't your real name?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Why not? Bonney is a common enough name, and so is William. It had to happen."

I still didn't know whether or not he was telling the truth about his name, but something about him intrigued me. Something in his eyes, in his manner, made me think that if his name wasn't William Bonney, he still *believed* it was. He seemed somehow out of place, and I wanted to know more about him.

But there was something a little frightening about him, as well. A coldness, an aloofness, that surrounded him like a wall.

"I've read all your books," he said. "I can't say I like many of them."

Not something a fan usually tells you after you sign the novel he just bought. "Really? I'm sorry to hear that. Is there anything in particular you don't like?"

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"You write good," he said. "But you don't put many gunfights in the books. Not the real kind. Not one fast draw against another."

"That's mostly a myth," I said. "Professional gunfighters almost never fought each other. In fact, I can't think of a single case where it happened."

"What about Jim Courtright and Luke Short?"

"Some people count that," I said. "But I'm not sure they should. Jim Courtright was a gunfighter, but Luke Short was a gambler. Short never tried a fast draw in his life before that fight."

"But he won," Bonney said. "Luke Short beat him."

"By dumb luck. Short just snapped off a wild shot that should have missed. Instead the bullet clipped off the tip of Courtright's thumb as he was cocking his pistol. Before he could switch the pistol to his good hand, Short took careful aim and killed him.

"The simple truth is, the fast-draw gunfight just didn't happen often, and never between gunfighters. Most gunfights were just, shoot the other man any way possible, including in the back."

Bonney's face was flushed. "That's not true. What about the code of the West? How do you explain that?"

"There's nothing to explain. The 'code of the West' didn't come from the West at all. Ned Buntline put that into one of his dime novels and it stuck. It was an even bigger myth than the gunfight at high noon."

"You don't know *anything,*" he said. "I'll bet you've never even belted on a Colt, let alone fired one. Some Western writer you are."

"I have fired a Colt," I said. "And I can usually hit what I aim at. But I'm a writer. I research the Old West, and I write stories about it. That's all.

"Look, if I offended you, I'm sorry. I do appreciate the fact that you read my novels, even if you disagree with them."

"You're still wrong," he said. "You're wrong about everything. I know what I'm talking about. You should see me draw a six-gun. I'm as good as any of them were.

"Maybe watching me use a six-gun would convince you?"

"I'm sure you're very good," I said. "Certainly better than I am. But I'll have to pass on the demonstration. I still have five cities to hit in the next five days."

His face was red from forehead to neck. He started to say something, stopped himself. For a minute he stared at me, then simply turned and headed for the door. But he looked back before leaving. "You'll see me again," he said. "You can count on it."

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Something in the tone of his voice shook me. There are nuts and oddballs everywhere, but most are harmless. I wasn't sure that was true of this guy. I had a hunch he was so far around the bend that he was completely out of sight, if you know what I mean.

For the rest of the evening and most of the night I was on edge, constantly feeling as if someone was watching my every move. I spent the evening in my hotel room, and even went so far as to call my agent just to talk about "William Bonney," if that was his real name.

My agent's name is Sam Catton, and he's a no-nonsense, hard-nosed son-of-a-mule, but he's also the best friend I have. He was concerned, but thought it was nothing to worry about. "By noon tomorrow you'll be in Denver," he said. "Odds are you'll never see this joker again."

Sam almost always makes sense, and what he had to say calmed me down considerably. So much so that when I called my wife, Mary Kay, I never even mentioned the incident. And at nine the next morning I was in Denver. The book signing there went off without a hitch, and without William Bonney showing up.

Two days after that I was in Dallas, at yet another bookstore, only this time it didn't go quite so well. The first person in line was William Bonney. He didn't have a book. He walked up to the table and looked down at me.

"You and me," he said. "That's the only way to settle this. Just you and me, and the best man wins."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said.

"You know," he said. "A gunfight, a showdown. You and me. Then we'll see who's right."

"You're crazy. If you aren't going to buy a book, then you'll have to leave. I don't have time for crazy talk like that."

"It's the only way to settle it. You have to see that. It's the only way."

"I'm going to have the owner call the police," I said. "You'd better leave."

I stood up and moved toward the counter. William Bonney stepped in front of me. "I'm leaving," he said. "But this ain't the end of it. We're going to settle this right."

He turned and walked out of the store. I waited until I was back at my hotel, then called the police and asked if there was anything they could do. It was carefully explained to me that so far William Bonney, if that was his real name, had done nothing illegal. At most

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he might be charged with harassment, and that only if he persisted in bothering me.

And even if grounds to arrest him could be found, where was he? I couldn't be sure he'd given me his real name, I didn't know where he lived, or much of anything else about him.

The police officer I spoke with advised me to go on with my tour and forget about Bonney. He was probably just a nut, and like as not, I'd never hear from him again. With no recourse, I tried to do as advised, putting Bonney out of my mind as much as possible. The last two cities on the tour came and went with no sign of William Bonney.

On Sunday I returned home, a ranch-style house in Arizona, located as far as possible from the nearest neighbor. I frequently feel guilty leaving Mary Kay alone there so much of the time, but she claims to love it. I let her convince me she's perfectly all right.

Mary Kay is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, and why she married a raw-boned, homely, country boy like me is beyond comprehension. But I'm eternally grateful that she did. She's the love of my life, the very meaning of life. Coming home to her after a long absence is like leaving hell and entering heaven. It makes up for everything.

Time at home doesn't seem to have a speed. We are surrounded by desert, and no matter the rush of time in the outside world, the desert remains timeless. So do we. The days blend, Mary Kay is there, and whether I'm at home with her five minutes or five months, the happiness and contentment I feel never fade.

This time a month passed, late summer edged toward fall, and all was right with our world. Then the phone rang and I answered it. William Bonney was on the other end of the line.

"Took awhile to find you," he said.

"What do you want?"

"You know what I want. I want this settled. You ain't telling the truth in your books. You make the Old West sound mean, cheap. I can't allow that."

"Look, I'm busy, and I don't have time for silly games. Just leave me alone."

His voice picked up speed. "You had better take me seriously. I mean to have it out with you."

I said nothing, hung up the phone. It rang again almost before I could turn around. I answered, knowing it would be Bonney again. It was.

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"No more fooling around," he said. "Do you know where Gunsight is?"

"It's a ghost town about twenty miles south of here."

"That's right. Meet me there day after tomorrow, a little before noon. Bring a Colt."

"What? You are out of your mind. I'm not about to meet you there or anywhere else."

"You'll meet me," he said. "One way or another. Remember, a little before noon."

He hung up this time, and for a few minutes I stood there, wondering how to handle the situation. Then I talked it over with Mary Kay. "He sounds crazy," she said. "We have to call the sheriff."

"I don't know what he can do."

"Maybe the sheriff can scare him away, even if he can't do anything else. Please, Jim, call him."

I called him. His name was Trace Kerrigan, and he told me pretty much what I'd expected. "I don't know how much we can do," he said. "Until he actually makes a move against you it's pretty tough to charge him with anything serious, and then it might be too late.

"William Bonney, huh? Sounds like a nut who thinks he's Billy the Kid. Look, I'll take a deputy and show up in Gunsight at the time you're supposed to. If he's there we'll run him in. It won't amount to much, but maybe we can frighten him off."

The next two days seemed to fly by, but the morning I was supposed to meet Bonney the clock crawled toward noon. It was two o'clock when Sheriff Kerrigan called. "He was there," Kerrigan said. "Armed to the teeth. We arrested him, but we can't hold him more than seventy-two hours without a charge.

"Oh, I checked his driver's license. William Bonney is his real name, though he might have had it legally changed. I'm looking into it."

"What happens now?" I asked.

"Not much. All we can do is hope this scares him away. If it doesn't, we'll try something else."

Sheriff Kerrigan did his part, holding Bonney until the last legal minute. He also threw in a tough warning when he finally had to set him free. Then all we could do was wait and see if the three days in jail had the desired effect.

Two weeks passed with no word from Bonney, and my hopes were high. Then Mary Kay drove into town to go shopping. Town is almost

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thirty miles away, and the road is a lonely one. Mary Kay never made it.

It was about ten in the morning, and I was watching some silly game show on TV when the phone rang. When I answered it, I heard Mary Kay's voice. "Don't come out here," she said. "Call the police, he's going—"

Then William Bonney's voice came on the line. "You shouldn't have called the sheriff," he said. "You should have faced me like a man."

"Let my wife go, you bastard. She doesn't have anything to do with this."

"You made me take her. She stays here until you show up. No law this time. I mean it. If you call the sheriff or anyone else, I'll kill her. They may arrest me, but I'll kill her first."

My voice was thick. "I understand. Where do we meet?"

"Same place. Be here before noon. Come alone and bring your gun. I see anyone else and I'll put a bullet through your wife's head."

He hung up. I slumped against the wall, trying to think, hoping there was a way out. There wasn't. He was just crazy enough to kill Mary Kay if I didn't follow his instructions to the letter.

I did own a Colt. In fact, I owned almost a dozen.

Mostly I bought them for research purposes, and while I'd fired one enough to be a decent shot, I'd never even tried a fast draw except once, and that was out of curiosity.

It didn't work. My hand caught the Colt wrong and it flew out of my hand, discharging when it hit the ground. I felt the snap of air as the bullet whistled within inches of my ear. I never again tried a fast draw.

Now I had no choice. I went into my den and took a Model 1873 Colt Peacemaker from the display case, loaded it, slipped it into a holster, and belted it on. It was heavy, but rested well on my hip. Taking the Jeep, I drove south toward Gunsight.

Gunsight isn't one of the well-known ghost towns. It's too far off the beaten track, and not very impressive. A hundred years earlier it was a mining town, and a couple of old smelters still stood. So did a dozen wooden, false-front buildings.

I drove slowly down the main street, my eyes searching the buildings. William Bonney showed in the door of a saloon and flagged the Jeep down. "Get out of the Jeep," he said, "and walk to the middle of the street."

"Where's my wife?"

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He said something over his shoulder and Mary Kay yelled to me. "I'm all right, Jim. Please, don't fight him. I saw him practicing. He'll kill you."

"Walk to the middle of the street," he said, "or I'll kill her right now."

The sun was hot and the street ankle deep in dust. But I walked to the middle and turned to face Bonney. He walked out of the saloon and into the street, his eyes never leaving mine. My mouth was dry, my heart beating so fast and hard I was afraid it would burst.

We stood in the street, forty feet apart. I was absolutely certain I was about to die. All because of some foolish myth about the code of the West. All because . . .

I don't know where the idea came from. Maybe it was from thinking about that damnable code. I didn't know how good the idea was, but I did know it was my only chance.

"This is the way it was meant to be," Bonney said. "Just the two of us, facing each other over the barrel of a gun, and the best man wins.

"I'm going to throw a silver dollar as high as I can. When it hits the ground we both draw. Agreed?"

"You're a liar and a coward," I said. "If you really wanted a showdown you wouldn't have brought help."

His face took on a puzzled expression. "Huh? I don't know what you're talking about. I came alone."

Slowly raising my left hand, I pointed over his shoulder.

"Then who the hell is that?" I asked.

He instinctively turned his head to look. I drew the moment his eyes were off me, not trying to be fast, simply lifting the Colt from the holster and thumbing back the hammer as I extended my arm.

At the sound of the Colt being cocked Bonney jerked his head back around. His eyes opened wide and he drew. But I was already squeezing the trigger. The Colt bucked in my hand and I saw the bullet jerk Bonney around. There was blood on his shirt, but he had his own Colt out and was trying to raise it.

I aimed carefully and fired again. The bullet made an ugly whumping sound as it struck him right below the breastbone. The Colt flew out of his hand and he folded, landing on his face in the dust. He rolled over and I walked to him, the Colt still in my hand.

His shirt was covered with blood, and a thin trickle of red ran from the corner of his mouth. But he was still alive, still able to speak. "You . . . you *cheated!*" he said. He coughed and more blood

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stained his lips. "The code. You broke the code of the West. You . . ."

No more words came and I looked down at him. "I tried to tell you," I said. "The code is a myth. The only code any of them followed was, get the other guy before he gets you. That's what I did."

Bonney's eyes turned to glass and I knew he was dead. Holstering the Colt, I walked to the saloon. Mary Kay was sitting in a corner, her hands and feet tied, but unharmed.

"What happened?" she asked. "Did you kill him?"

"He's dead. He just didn't understand what the real West was like. In a way, I feel sorry for him."

I untied Mary Kay and she came into my arms. "I'm just glad it wasn't you," she said. "Take me home."

As we drove out of Gunsight I glanced back at the body still lying in the middle of the street. "I think my next novel will be a mystery," I said. "Or science fiction. I believe I've had enough of the Old West for a while."

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Ed Gorman is one of those figures whose presence is felt in every area of the crime field. He has distinguished himself as a writer, earning an Edgar nomination in 1991; he is the editor of many notable crime fiction anthologies, including the successful series Cat Crimes; *and he is one of the founders and the publisher of* Mystery Scene Magazine, *an important journal of mystery fandom. . . .*

LAYOVER

by ED GORMAN

In the darkness, the girl said, "Are you all right?"

"Huh?"

"I woke you up because you sounded so bad. You must have been having a nightmare."

"Oh. Yeah. Right." I tried to laugh but the sound just came out strangled and harsh.

Cold midnight. Deep Midwest. A Greyhound bus filled with old folks and runaway kids and derelicts of every kind. Anybody can afford a Greyhound ticket these days, that's why you find so many geeks and freaks aboard. I was probably the only guy on the bus who had a real purpose in life. And if I needed a reminder of that purpose, all I had to do was shove my hand into the pocket of my peacoat and touch the chill blue metal of the .38. I had a purpose all right.

The girl had gotten on a day before, during a dinner stop. She wasn't what you'd call pretty, but then neither was I. We talked, of course, the way you do when you travel; dull grinding social chatter at first, but eventually you get more honest. She told me she'd just been dumped by a guy named Mike, a used-car salesman at Belaski Motors in a little town named Burnside. She was headed to Chicago where she'd find a job and show Mike that she was capable of going on without him. Come to think of it, I guess Polly here had a goal, too, and in a certain way our goals were similar. We both wanted to pay people back for hurting us.

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Sometime around ten, when the driver turned off the tiny overhead lights and people started falling asleep, I heard her start crying. It wasn't loud and it wasn't hard, but it was genuine. There was a lot of pain there.

I don't know why—I'm not the type of guy to get involved—but I put my hand on her lap. She took it in both of her hands and held it tightly. "Thanks," she said, and leaned over and kissed me with wet cheeks and a trembling hot little mouth.

"You're welcome," I said, and that's when I drifted off to sleep, the wheels of the Greyhound thrumming down the highway, the dark coffin inside filled with people snoring, coughing, and whispering.

According to the luminous hands on my wristwatch, it was forty-five minutes later when Polly woke me up to tell me I'd been having a nightmare.

The lights were still off overhead. The only illumination was the soft silver of moonlight through the tinted window. We were in the backseat on the left-hand side of the back aisle. The only thing behind us was the john, which almost nobody seemed to use. The seats across from her were empty.

After telling me about how sorry she felt for me having nightmares like that, she leaned over and whispered, "Who's Kenny?"

"Kenny?"

"That's the name you kept saying in your nightmare."

"Oh."

"You're not going to tell me, huh?"

"Doesn't matter. Really."

I leaned back and closed my eyes. There was just darkness and the turning of the wheels and the winter air whistling through the windows. You could smell the faint exhaust.

"You know what I keep thinking?" she said.

"No. What?" I didn't open my eyes.

"I keep thinking we're the only two people in the world, you and I, and we're on this fabulous boat and we're journeying to someplace beautiful."

I had to laugh at that. She sounded so naive, yet desperate, too. "Someplace beautiful, huh?"

"Just the two of us."

And she gave my hand a little squeeze. "I'm sorry I'm so corny," she said.

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And that's when it happened. I started to turn around in my seat and felt something fall out of my pocket and hit the floor, going *thunk*. I didn't have to wonder what it was.

Before I could reach it, she bent over, her long blond hair silver in the moonlight, and got it for me.

She looked at it in her hand and said, "Why would you carry a gun?"

"Long story."

She looked as if she wanted to take the gun and throw it out the window. She shook her head. "You're going to do something with this, aren't you?"

I sighed and reached over and took the gun from her. "I'd like to try and catch a little nap if you don't mind."

"But—"

And I promptly turned over so that three-fourths of my body was pressed against the chill wall of the bus. I pretended to go to sleep, resting there and smelling diesel fuel and feeling the vibration of the motor.

The bus roared on into the night. It wouldn't be long before I'd be seeing Dawn and Kenny again. I touched the .38 in my pocket. No, not long at all.

If you've taken many Greyhounds, then you know about layovers. You spend an hour-and-a-half gulping down greasy food and going into the bathroom in a john that reeks like a city dump on a hot day and staring at people in the waiting area who seem to be deformed in every way imaginable. Or that's how they look at 2:26 A.M., anyway.

This layover was going to be different. At least for me. I had plans.

As the bus pulled into a small brick depot that looked as if it had been built back during the Depression, Polly said, "You're going to do it here, aren't you?"

"Do what?"

"Shoot somebody."

"Why would you say that?"

"I've just got a feeling is all. My mom always says I have ESP."

She started to say something else, but then the driver lifted the microphone and gave us his spiel about how the layover would be a full hour and how there was good food to be had in the restaurant and how he'd enjoyed serving us. There'd be a new driver for the next six hours of our journey, he said.

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There weren't many lights on in the depot. Passengers stood outside for a while stretching and letting the cold air wake them up.

I followed Polly off the bus and immediately started walking away. An hour wasn't a long time.

Before I got two steps, she snagged my arm. "I was hoping we could be friends. You know, I mean, we're a lot alike." In the shadowy light of the depot, she looked younger than ever. Young and well scrubbed and sad. "I don't want you to get into trouble. Whatever it is, you've got your whole life ahead of you. It won't be worth it. Honest."

"Take care of yourself," I said, and leaned over and kissed her.

She grabbed me again and pulled me close and said, "I got in a little trouble once myself. It's no fun. Believe me."

I touched her cheek gently and then I set off, walking quickly into the darkness.

Armstrong was a pretty typical midwestern town, four blocks of retail area, fading brick grade school and junior high, a small public library with a white stone edifice, a courthouse, a Chevrolet dealership, and many blocks of small white frame houses that all looked pretty much the same in the early morning gloom. You could see frost rimed on the windows and lonely gray smoke twisting up from the chimneys. As I walked, my heels crunched ice. Faint streetlight threw everything into deep shadow. My breath was silver.

A dog joined me for a few blocks and then fell away. Then I spotted a police cruiser moving slowly down the block. I jumped behind a huge oak tree, flattening myself against the rough bark so the cops couldn't see me. They drove right on past, not even glancing in my direction.

The address I wanted was a ranch house that sprawled over the west end of a cul-de-sac. A sweet little red BMW was parked in front of the two-stall garage and a huge satellite-dish antenna was discreetly hidden behind some fir trees. No lights shone anywhere.

I went around back and worked on the door. It didn't take me long to figure out that Kenny had gotten himself one of those infrared security devices. I tugged on my gloves, cut a fist-sized hole in the back-door window, reached in, and unlocked the deadbolt, and then pushed the door open. I could see one of the small round infrared sensors pointing down from the ceiling. Most fool burglars wouldn't even think to look for it and they'd pass right through the beam and the alarm would go off instantly.

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I got down on my haunches and half crawled until I was well past the eye of the infrared. No alarm had sounded. I went up three steps and into the house.

The dark kitchen smelled of spices, paprika and cinnamon and thyme. Dawn had always been a good and careful cook.

The rest of the house was about what I'd expected. Nice but not expensive furnishing, lots of records and videotapes, and even a small bumper-pool table in a spare room that doubled as a den. Nice, sure, but nothing that would attract attention. Nothing that would appear to have been financed by six hundred thousand dollars in bank robbery money.

And then the lights came on.

At first I didn't recognize the woman. She stood at the head of a dark narrow hallway wearing a loose cotton robe designed to conceal her weight.

The flowing dark hair is what misled me. Dawn had always been a blonde. But dye and a gain of maybe fifteen pounds had changed her appearance considerably. And so had time. It hadn't been a friend to her.

She said, "I knew you'd show up someday, Chet."

"Where's Kenny?"

"You want some coffee?"

"You didn't answer my question."

She smiled her slow, shy smile. "You didn't answer mine, either."

She led us into the kitchen where a pot of black stuff stayed warm in a Mr. Coffee. She poured two cups and handed me one of them.

"You came here to kill us, didn't you?" she said.

"You were my wife. And we were supposed to split everything three ways. But Kenny got everything—you and all the money. And I did six years in prison."

"You could have turned us in."

I shook my head. "I have my own way of settling things."

She stared at me. "You look great, Chet. Prison must have agreed with you."

"I just kept thinking of this night. Waiting."

Her mouth tightened and for the first time her blue eyes showed traces of fear. Softly, she said, "Why don't we go in the living room and talk about it."

I glanced at my wrist watch. "I want to see Kenny."

"You will. Come on now."

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So I followed her into the living room. I had a lot ahead of me. I wanted to kill them and then get back on the bus. While I'd be eating up the miles on a Greyhound, the local cops would be looking for a local killer. If only my gun hadn't dropped out and Polly seen it. But I'd have to worry about that later.

We sat on the couch. I started to say something but then she took my cup from me and set it on the glass table and came into my arms.

She opened her mouth and kissed me dramatically.

But good sense overtook me. I held her away and said, "So while we're making out, Kenny walks in and shoots me. Is that it?"

"Don't worry about Kenny. Believe me."

And then we were kissing again. I was embracing ghosts, ancient words whispered in the backseats of cars when we were in high school, tender promises made just before I left for Nam. Loving this woman had always been punishment because you could never believe her, never trust her, but I'd loved her anyway.

I'd just started to pull away when I heard the floor creak behind me and I saw Kenny. Even given how much I hated him—and how many long nights I'd lain on my prison bunk dreaming of vengeance—I had to feel embarrassed. If Kenny had been his old self, I would have relished the moment. But Kenny was different now. He was in a wheelchair and his entire body was twisted and crippled up like a cerebral palsy victim. A small plaid blanket was thrown across his legs.

He surprised me by smiling. "Don't worry, Chet. I've seen Dawn entertain a lot of men out here in the living room before."

"Spare him the details," she said. "And spare me, too, while you're at it."

He whispered a dirty word loud enough for us to hear.

He wheeled himself into the living room. The chair's electric motor whirred faintly as he angled over to the fireplace. On his way, he said, "You didn't wait long, Chet. You've only been out two weeks. You never did have much patience."

You could see the pain in his face when he moved.

I tried to say something, but I just kept staring at this man who was now a cripple. I didn't know what to say.

"Nice setup, huh?" Kenny said as he struck a stick match on the stone of the fireplace. With his hands twisted and gimped the way they were, it wasn't easy. He got his smoke going and said, "She tell you what happened to me?"

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I looked at Dawn. She dropped her gaze. "No," I said.

He snorted. The sound was bitter. "She was doin' it to me just the way she did it to you. Right?" he said and called her another dirty name.

She sighed, then lighted her own cigarette. "About six months after we ran out on you with all the money, I grabbed the strongbox and took off."

Kenny smirked. "She met a sailor. A goddamn sailor, if you can believe it."

"His name was Fred," she said. "Anyway, me and Fred had all the bank robbery money—there was still a couple hundred thousand left—when Kenny here came after us in that red Corvette he always wanted. He got right up behind us, but it was pouring rain and he skidded out of control and slammed into a tree."

He finished the story for me. "There was just one problem, right, Dawn? You had the strongbox but you didn't know what was inside. Her and the sailor were going to have somebody use tools on the lock I'd put on it. They saw me pile up my 'vette but they kept on going. But later that night when they blew open the strongbox and found out that I'd stuffed it with old newspapers, the sailor beat her up and threw her out. So she came back to me 'cause she just couldn't stand to be away from 'our' money. And this is where she's been all the time you were in the slam. Right here waitin' for poor pitiful me to finally tell her where I hid the loot. Or die. They don't give me much longer. That's what keeps her here."

"Pretty pathetic story, huh?" she said. She got up and went over to the small wet bar. She poured three drinks of pure Jim Beam and brought them over to us. She gunned hers in a single gulp and went right back for another.

"So she invites half the town in so she can have her fun while I vegetate in my wheelchair." Now it was his turn to down his whiskey. He hurled the glass into the fireplace. A long, uneasy silence followed.

I tried to remember the easy friendship the three of us had enjoyed back when we were in high school, before Kenny and I'd been in Nam, and before the three of us had taken up bank robbery for a living. Hard to believe we'd ever liked each other at all.

Kenny's head dropped down then. At first I thought he might have passed out, but then the choking sound of dry sobs filled the room and I realized he was crying.

"You're such a wimp," she said.

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And then it was her turn to smash her glass into the fireplace.

I'd never heard two people go at each other this way. It was degrading.

He looked up at me. "You stick around here long enough, Chet, she'll make a deal with you. She'll give you half the money if you beat me up and make me tell you where it is."

I looked over at her. I knew what he said was true.

"She doesn't look as good as she used to—she's kind of a used car now instead of a brand-new Caddy—but she's still got some miles left on her. You should hear her and some of her boyfriends out here on the couch when they get goin'."

She started to say something but then she heard me start to laugh.

"What the hell's so funny?"

I stood up and looked at my watch. I had only ten minutes left to get back to the depot.

Kenny glanced up from his wheelchair. "Yeah, Chet, what's so funny?"

I looked at them both and just shook my head. "It'll come to you. One of these days. Believe me."

And with that, I left.

She made a play for my arm and Kenny sat there glowering at me, but I just kept on walking. I had to hurry.

The cold, clean air not only revived me, it seemed to purify me in some way. I felt good again, whole and happy now that I was outdoors.

The bus was dark and warm. Polly had brought a bag of popcorn along. "You almost didn't make it," she said as the bus pulled away from the depot.

In five minutes we were rolling into countryside again. In farmhouses lights were coming on. In another hour, it would be dawn.

"You took it, didn't you?" I said.

"Huh?"

"You took it. My gun."

"Oh. Yes. I guess I did. I didn't want you to do anything crazy."

Back there at Kenny's I'd reached into my jacket pocket for the .38 and found it gone. "How'd you do it? You were pretty slick."

"Remember I told you I'd gotten into a little trouble? Well, an uncle of mine taught me how to be a pickpocket and so for a few months I followed in his footsteps. Till Sheriff Baines arrested me one day."

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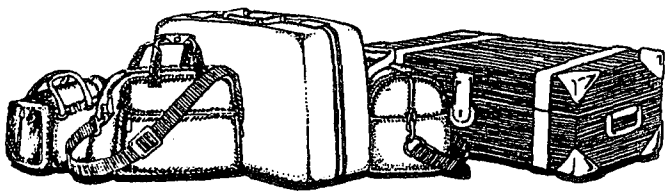
"I'm glad you took it."

She looked over at me in the darkness of the bus and grinned. She looked like a kid. "You really didn't want to do it, did you?"

"No," I said, staring out the window at the midwestern night. I thought of them back there in the house, in a prison cell they wouldn't escape till death. No, I hadn't wanted to shoot anybody at all. And, as things turned out, I hadn't had to either. Their punishment was each other.

"We're really lucky we met each other, Chet."

"Yeah," I said, thinking of Dawn and Kenny again. "You don't know how lucky we are."



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a distinguished short story by

REGINALD HILL

Many series characters seem never to age, or to age at a quite different rate from the rest of us, leaving us to wonder what they'd be like in their golden years. Reginald Hill gives us a hilarious forward look at his Detective-Superintendent Andrew Dalziel in the year 2010. Dalziel is not yet in his dotage, but his protégé Pascoe now calls the shots in a case that takes the duo to—of all places—the moon. "One Small Step" is a revised and shortened version of a novelette by Reginald Hill published in the U.K. in 1990. . . .

ONE SMALL STEP

by REGINALD HILL

1.

The first man to land on the moon was Neil Armstrong on the twentieth of July, 1969. As he stepped off the module ladder, he said, "One small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind."

The first man to be murdered on the moon was Emile Lemarque on the fourteenth of May, 2010. As he fell off the module ladder, he said, *"Oh mer—"*

There were two hundred and twenty-seven million witnesses.

One of these was ex-Detective-Superintendent Andrew Dalziel, who was only watching because the battery of his TV remote control had failed. What he really wanted to see was his favorite episode of *Star Trek* on the Nostalgia Channel. By comparison, Michelin men bouncing dustily over lunar slag heaps made very dull viewing, particularly with the Yanks probing to the edge of the solar system. But the Federated States of Europe had waited a long time for their

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share of space glory and the Euro Channel had been ordered to give blanket coverage.

In the U.K. this met with a mixed response, and not just from those who preferred *Star Trek*. Britain's decision to opt out of the Federal Space Programme had seemed a welcome economy in the niggardly nineties. Once the moon came in sight, however, the patriotic tabloids started screaming, how come these inferior foreigners were prancing around in the Greatest Show Off Earth with no U.K. involvement unless you counted the use of English as the expedition's *lingua franca?*

But all most True Brits felt when they realized their choice of channels had been reduced from ninety-seven to ninety-six was a vague irritation, which Andy Dalziel would probably have shared had he been able to switch over manually. Unfortunately he was confined to bed by an attack of gout, and irritation rapidly boiled into rage, especially as his visiting nurse, who had retired to the kitchen for a recuperative smoke, ignored all his cries for help. It took a violent splintering explosion to bring her running, white-faced, into the bedroom.

Dalziel was sinking back into his pillows, flushed with the effort and the triumph of having hurled his useless remote control through the telly screen.

"Now look what you've made me do," he said. "Don't just stand there. Fetch me another set. I'm missing *Star Trek.*"

It took three days for it to emerge that what the two hundred and twenty-seven million witnesses had seen wasn't just an unhappy accident but murder.

Till then, most of the U.K. press coverage had been concerned with interpreting the dead man's possibly unfinished last words. The favourite theory was that *Oh mer . . .* was simply *oh mère,* a dying man's appeal to his mother, though the Catholic *Lozenge* stretched this piously to *Oh mère de Dieu.* When it was suggested that a life member of the *Société Athéiste et Humaniste de France* (Lourdes branch) would be unlikely to trouble the Virgin with his dying breath, the *Lozenge* tartly retorted that history was crammed with deathbed conversions. The *Jupiter,* whose aged owner ascribed his continued survival to just such a conversion during his last heart attack, showed its sympathy for this argument by adapting Camden's couplet in its leader headline—BETWIXT THE MODULE AND THE GROUND, MERCY HE ASKED, MERCY HE FOUND. The *Defender,* tak-

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ing this literally, suggested that if indeed Lemarque had been going to say *Oh merci,* this was less likely to be a plea for divine grace than an expression of ironic gratitude, as in, "Well, thanks a bunch for bringing me so far, then chopping me off at the knees!" The *Planet* meanwhile had torpedoed the *oh mère* theory to its own satisfaction by the discovery that Lemarque had been raised in a Lourdes orphanage where he had been very badly treated and *never taken to the seaside* (the *Planet*'s italics), persuading the editor that this poor deprived foreigner had reverted to infancy in the face of annihilation and was once again pleading to be taken *au mer.* Chortling with glee, the *Intransigent* pointed out that *mer* was feminine and congratulated the *Planet* on now being illiterate in two languages. Then it rather surrendered its superior position by speculating that, coming from Lourdes, Lemarque might have fantasized that he was falling into the famous healing pool and started to cry, *Eau merveilleux!*

It took the staid *Autograph* to say what all the French papers had agreed from the start—that Lemarque was merely exclaiming, like any civilized Gaul in a moment of stress, *Oh merde!*

All this Dalziel found rather less enthralling than nonalcoholic lager. But when the *Spheroid* scooped them all by revealing under the banner CASE OF THE EXPIRING FROG! that the Eurofed Department of Justice was treating Lemarque's death as murder, he sat up and took notice, particularly when it was announced that the man in charge of the case was the U.K. commissioner in the Eurofed Justice Department, none other than his old friend and former colleague, Peter Pascoe.

"I taught that lad everything he knows," he boasted as he watched Pascoe's televised press conference from Strasbourg.

"Lad?" snorted Miss Montague, his new nurse, who could snatch and press her own considerable weight and whose rippling muscles filled Dalziel with nostalgic lust. "He looks almost as decrepit as you!"

Dalziel grunted a promise of revenge as extreme, and as impotent, as Lear's, and turned up the sound on his new set.

Pascoe was saying, "In effect, what was at first thought to be a simple though tragic systems failure resulting in a short circuit in the residual products unit of his TEC, that is, Total Environment Costume, sometimes called lunar suit, appears after more detailed examination by American scientists working in the U.S. lunar village, for the use of whose facilities may I take this chance to say we

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are truly thankful, to have been deliberately induced."

For a moment all the reporters were united in deep incomprehension. The man from the *Onlooker* raised his eyebrows and the woman from the *Defender* lowered her glasses; some scribbled earnestly as if they understood everything, others yawned ostentatiously as if there were nothing to understand. But it took the man from the *Spheroid* to put the necessary probing question—"You wha'?"

Patiently Pascoe resumed. "Not to put too fine a point on it, and using layman's language, the microcircuitry of the residual products unit of his TEC had been deliberately cross-linked with both the main and the reserve power systems in such a manner that it needed only the addition of a conductive element, in this case liquescent, to complete the circuit with unfortunate, that is, fatal, consequences."

Now the reporters were united in a wild surmise. The *Onlooking* eyebrows were lowered, the *Defending* spectacles raised. But once again it was the earnest seeker of enlightenment from the *Spheroid* who so well expressed what everyone was thinking. "You mean he pissed himself to death?"

Dalziel laughed so much he almost fell out of bed, though the nurse noted with interest that some internal gyroscope kept his brimming glass of Lucozade steady in his hand. Recovering, he downed the drink in a single gulp and, still chuckling, listened once more to his erstwhile underling.

Pascoe was explaining, "While there would certainly be a severe shock, this was not of itself sufficient to be fatal. But the short circuit would have cut dead all TEC systems, including the respiratory unit. It was the shock that made him fall. But it was the lack of oxygen that killed him, before the dust had started to settle."

This sobered the gathering a little. But newsmen's heartstrings vibrate less plangently than their deadlines and soon Pascoe was being bombarded with questions about the investigation, which he fielded so blandly and adroitly that finally Dalziel switched off in disgust and poured himself another glass of Lucozade. The nurse seized the bottle and raised it to her nostrils.

"I think this has gone off," she said. "It smells peaty."

"Tastes all right to me," said Dalziel. "Try a nip."

Miss Montague poured herself a glass, raised it, sipped it delicately.

"You know," she said thoughtfully, "you could be right."

"I usually am," said Dalziel. "Cheers!"

* * *

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At nine that night the telephone rang.

"This is a recording," said Dalziel. "If you want to leave a message, stick it in a bottle."

"You sound very jolly," said Pascoe.

"Well, I've supped a lot of Lucozade," said Dalziel, looking at the gently snoring figure of Nurse Montague on the sofa opposite. "What's up?"

"Just a social call. Did you see me on the box?"

"I've got better things to do than listen to civil bloody servants being civil and servile," growled Dalziel.

"Oh, you did see it, then. That's what we call diplomatic language out here in the real world," said Pascoe.

"Oh aye. Up here it's called soft soap and it's very good for enemas."

Pascoe laughed and said, "All right, Andy. I never could fool you, could I? Yes, this whole thing has got a great crap potential. To start with, we reckon the Yanks deliberately leaked their suspicion of foul play to bounce us into letting them take full control of the investigation. Now, we're not terribly keen on that idea."

"Oh aye? Don't they have jurisdiction anyway?"

"Certainly not. Space is international by UN treaty. But they're established up there with all the facilities, so on the surface it's a generous, neighbourly offer, only . . . Look, it's a bit complicated. . . ."

"Come on, lad, I'm not quite gaga and I do read the papers still," snarled Dalziel. "It's this Eurofed summit thing, isn't it?"

"Is it?" murmured Pascoe. "Do expound."

"All right, clevercuts. There's a lot of Euros fed up with having to compete with the Yanks in their own backyard, so they'd like to build up import tariffs like the Great Wall of China. Plus the soldier boys would like to give NATO the elbow and concentrate on a pure Eurofed force buying nowt but made-in-Europe military hardware. As usual, if France and Germany get together on this, they'll railroad the rest. So anything that gets the Krauts and Frogs at each other's goolies will be good news in Washington just now.

"Conclusion. The Americans have elected the German crew member number one suspect, and you reckon any investigation they mount will make bloody sure that's where the finger points. How's that for a bit of close political analysis?"

"Marvellous," breathed Pascoe admiringly. "Who speaks so well should never speak in vain."

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"I don't know about in vain, but I do prefer in plain English. So what have they got on this German, then?"

There was a long pause.

"Come on, lad," said Dalziel. "They must have a pretty good case against him, else you'd not be so worried."

"Yes, they do. But it's not . . . Look, Andy. I'm sorry, but the thing is, security. You're not cleared for this. It's a need-to-know classification and the only people who need to know outside of government are the investigating officers. So I really can't tell you any more. Not unless I appointed you an investigating officer!"

He said this with a light dismissive laugh, but Dalziel had had many years' experience of interpreting Pascoe's light laughs.

"All right, lad," he said softly. "What's going off? Spit it out and make it quick, else this phone goes back down so hard it'll need a jemmy to prise it back up."

"There's no fooling you, is there, Andy?" said Pascoe. "Okay. Straight it is. I've been asked to take charge of the case, not because I'm the best, but because I'm not French, German, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, Danish, or Irish. Meaning none of the countries actually involved in the *Europa*'s mission will trust any of the others to give them a fair deal! They've given me a free hand. They've also given me four days to get a result."

"*Any* result?"

"The truth, Andy," said Pascoe heavily. "That's the result I'm looking for."

"Only asking," said Dalziel. "So how come you're wasting time talking to a clapped-out candidate for the boneyard?"

"Andy, I need eyes and I need a nose. All right, I know I could have any of the Yard's top men for the asking. Only, nowadays they get to the top by being on top of the technology and that's no use to me here. Technology's a two-way ticket. If you live by it, you can be fooled by it. So what I need is a seat-of-the-pants copper with a bloodhound's nose, who's got nothing to lose or to gain, and who doesn't give a tuppenny toss about any bugger. I fed this data into my computer and it let out a huge burp. So I picked up the phone and I rang you, Andy. What do you say?"

"You cheeky sod!" exclaimed Dalziel. "I say you must be off your trolley! My nose is so out of practice I can hardly tell Orkney from Islay. As for seat-of-the-pants, I've been stuck in bed with gout for nigh on a fortnight, and I don't want no jokes either."

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"Who's laughing? Andy, what you clearly need is a place where you won't have to worry about putting pressure on your foot, and I can help you there."

"Hold on," said Dalziel. "I didn't quite get that. This must be a bad line. You *are* talking about bringing the *Europa*'s crew back to Earth for investigation, aren't you? Well, *aren't you?*"

"Andy!" said Pascoe reprovingly. "First thing you taught me was, good investigation starts at the scene of the crime. And anyway, you always expected the moon from me. So how can you turn me down now that I'm finally offering it to you?"

2.

Perhaps space travel weren't so bad after all, admitted Andy Dalziel as he lay on his back and watched the stars. But he'd taken some convincing, jumping up in alarm as Pascoe urged him into the soft yielding couch on the U.S. lunar shuttle which had been ferrying distinguished visitors to the moon for half a decade.

"What's going off?" he demanded. "This thing's trying to feel me up!"

"It's all right," assured Pascoe. "It's just a wraparound fabric to hold you in place when we achieve weightlessness. Honestly, it'll just be like riding in a limo, without any traffic jams."

"If it's so bloody easy, why's the Federation making such a big thing about it?"

"It's like going up Mont Blanc," explained Pascoe patiently. "You can either book a table at the summit restaurant and take the scenic railway or you can pack your sarnies into your rucksack and climb. Thing is, with the moon, doing it on our own the hard way establishes our right to be there. Space is international just now, but there may come a time when the carving up starts, and we don't want to be scavenging for crumbs under the Americans' chair."

"Bloody hell," said Dalziel. "I'll leave the politicking to you, lad. I'll stick to nicking villains. If I survive the trip, that is."

In fact, he was feeling better than he'd done for some time. The doctor had confirmed that his heart was in good order for a man of his age. He'd been more concerned about the high blood pressure related to Dalziel's gout, but the drugs Dalziel was taking seemed to have this under control, and reluctantly he'd given the go-ahead. Now, as the shuttle came swooping in over the moon's surface, the fat man was delighted to find that his gout symptoms had almost completely vanished.

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"You were right, lad," he admitted. "There's nowt to this astronaut business."

"Not this way," agreed Pascoe. "Mind you, *Europa*'s not so luxurious."

"Can't be, if they're still crapping in their breeks," said Dalziel.

"Andy, I thought I'd explained," said Pascoe long-sufferingly. "They only need their TECs for moving around the moon's surface. In the mother ship they just wear light tunics. The TECs were kept in the hold. Each crew member has his or her own locker and each suit is individually tailored and has a name tag stuck to it, so it's quite clear that whoever tampered with Lemarque's was aiming at him and no one else. Now, have you got it?"

"All right, I'm with you," said Dalziel. "No need to go on about things. Christ, have you looked down there? Where's this village at?"

"Let's see. Yes, there it is, down there, in the Sea of Tranquillity."

"Those pimples? Looks like an outbreak of chicken pox."

Dalziel wasn't altogether wrong. The Village, a complex of sealed domes linked by corridors, covering about five acres, did indeed resemble a patch of blisters on the lunar skin till their third braking orbit brought out the scale of the thing. Next time round, one of the domes loomed large before them, threatening collision, and then they were slipping smoothly into a docking bay, and suddenly the stars were out of sight.

The commander of the Lunar Village was waiting to greet them. He was a small balding astrophysicist with a nervous manner who passed them over with speed and unconcealable relief to his head of security, Colonel Ed Druson, a lean and wiry black man with the stretched look of an athlete who has carried his twenties training schedules into his forties.

"Welcome to the moon," he said, offering his hand. "Hope you had a good trip."

"Aye, it were grand," said Dalziel, bouncing gently up and down to test the effect of gravity on his gouty foot. Delighted to feel no pain, he went on, "Only thing is, that spaceship of thine didn't seem to have a bar, and it's thirsty work travelling."

"Andy," said Pascoe warningly. "Should you, with your gout?"

"Bugger the gout," said Dalziel. "I've got a throat like a spinster's pit. I could even thole bourbon if you've not got the real stuff."

"I'll see what we can do," said Druson, clearly wondering what the hell the Brits were up to, filling valuable shuttle space with an overweight, geriatric alcoholic who had gout.

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He went on, "Like we told your people, *Europa*'s in a parking orbit with one of our guys acting nightwatch. We've got the crew in our accommodation dome. Looks like an open and shut case. Could have saved yourselves the bother of a trip, I reckon. You've seen our file on the German? Jesus, you Euros surely know how to pick 'em!"

To Dalziel it sounded like a just rebuke. Pascoe had provided him with copies of all the astronauts' files plus the American incident report. This contained statements from the *Europa* crew, setting out where they were and what they were doing at the time of the fatality, plus Druson's own analysis and conclusions. He saw little reason to look further than Kaufmann as culprit, and offered two pieces of concrete evidence and a motive.

The first pointer was an entry in Lemarque's private journal. Several of the astronauts kept such journals with an eye to a literary future after their flying days were over. Lemarque's consisted mainly of fluorescently purple prose about the beauties of space. Then at the end of a much polished speech in which he told the world of his sense of honour at being the first Euro, and more importantly, the first Frenchman, to step out onto the moon's surface, he had scribbled almost indecipherably, *Ka s'en fâche. Gardes-toi!*

Ka is getting angry. Watch out!

Was *Ka* Kaufmann? Druson had asked. And the discovery of a microprobe in the German's locker had deepened his suspicions. A gloss for the nontechnical pointed out that a microprobe was a kind of electronic screwdriver which would have been necessary in the readjustment of the TEC circuits.

But there was still the question of motive. And why was Ka getting angry?

"Blackmail," Druson replied promptly. "You've read the file. It's obvious."

It certainly appeared so. The major part of the American report was a digest of a CIA investigation which concluded that Captain Dieter Kaufmann of the Eurofed Air Corps had been selling NATO technology to the Arabs for the past decade.

It was detailed and unanswerable. And it hadn't been compiled overnight.

"It would have been neighbourly to pass this information on a little earlier," suggested Pascoe mildly. "Say three years earlier."

It was three years since Kaufmann had joined the *Europa* crew.

"We like to be sure of our facts in such a serious matter," said Druson.

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Also, thought Pascoe, Kaufmann's full-time transfer into the Eurospace programme had removed him from access to NATO information and left him with nothing to pass on but European astrotechnology which in American terms was yesterday's news. With no threat to themselves, the Americans had decided to keep their information under their hat till they could make maximum profit from it.

Now that moment had come.

"Can we look at the body?" said Pascoe. "Just for the record."

"Sure. But it ain't very pretty."

Dalziel had seen a lot worse.

"Not very big, is he?" said Pascoe.

"Depends where you're looking," said Dalziel.

He turned away from the body and picked up the Frenchman's TEC, which was also on display.

"I bet he fancied himself too," he said. "These little fellows often do."

"Why do you say that, Andy?" asked Pascoe.

"His name tag, for a start."

Instead of following a horizontal line, the adhesive name strip had been adjusted to a jaunty thirty-degree angle echoing the shoulder seam.

"Used to get buggers in the Force who tried to tart up their uniforms like that," said Dalziel, sniffing at the headpiece. "And they usually wore aftershave that'd kill mosquitoes too."

"Seems he did have a reputation for being a cocky little bastard," said Druson, looking at Dalziel with a new respect.

Pascoe said, "And the circuitry was definitely interfered with?"

"Oh yeah. Clear as a fox among chickens. Rush job by the look of it. Well, it would have to be, in the *Europa*'s hold. No time for finesse."

"No," agreed Pascoe. "Seen enough, Andy?"

"More than enough," said Dalziel. "Did someone say something about a room with a bed in it?"

"Let's go," said Druson.

He led them to their quarters, two small bedrooms with a shared living room. When the door had shut behind him, Dalziel said, "Okay, lad. What do you reckon? Still a fit-up by the Yanks?"

"Open mind," said Pascoe. "They've certainly put a reasonable case together. Maybe Kaufmann did do it."

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"Mebbe. I'd trust 'em a lot more if yon black bugger hadn't managed to forget that Glenmorangie he promised me!"

Pascoe grinned and said, "A good night's sleep will do you more good, Andy. Nothing more to be done till tomorrow. Then it'll be straight down to the interrogations."

"Hold on," said Dalziel. "Scene of the crime, remember? Shouldn't we fix up to visit the *Europa* before we do owt else?"

"Don't worry," said Pascoe. "I'll be arranging a trip as soon as possible. But time's too short to waste, so in the morning let's get on with talking to the crew, shall we? Now I thought we'd work individually. I'll take three and you take three, then we'll swap over . . ."

"Swap away!" said Dalziel obstinately. "Until we've seen *Europa* what they say won't make bloody sense, will it?"

There was a tap at the door. Pascoe didn't move. Dalziel scowled at him and went to answer it.

A smiling young man handed him two litre-sized bottles, saying, "There you go, pops."

"Pops!" said Pascoe as Dalziel closed the door. "You must be mellowing, Andy. Time was when you'd have nutted anyone who spoke to you like that."

"That was when I was young and daft," said Dalziel, removing the seal from one of the bottles. "At my age, anyone who gives me two litres of Glenmorangie can call me Mavis if he likes. You want a splash?"

"Only water," said Pascoe. "I'll have a shower. Then I'll work out a schedule for the interrogations before I go to bed. Okay?"

He spoke defiantly. Dalziel stared at him for a moment, then shrugged.

"Fine," he said. "You're the boss now."

"So I am," smiled Pascoe as he left. "So I am."

"And I'm to be Queen of the May, Mother," murmured Dalziel raising the bottle to his lips. "I'm to be Queen of the May!"

3.

Dalziel had a bad night. He dreamt he challenged Nurse Montague to the best of three falls and lost by a straight submission. It wouldn't have been so bad if the dream had been erotic but it was merely humiliating and he woke up dry and droopy as a camel's tail. Whisky only washed his black thoughts blacker and when fi-

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nally there came a tap on the door and Pascoe's voice invited him to go to breakfast, he snarled, "Sod off!"

Only the younger man's offer to call the Village medics and have someone check him out got Dalziel out of bed. He was still running his portable electric razor over the shadowy planet of his face as they made their way to the *Europa* crew's dome, and this at last provoked an honestly irritated response from Pascoe.

"For heaven's sake, Andy, put that thing away. We *are* representing the Federal Justice Department, after all!"

With his first twinge of pleasure of the day, Dalziel slipped the slim plastic razor case into his breast pocket and followed Pascoe into the dome.

The six survivors of the *Europa* crew were an interesting assortment. It was almost possible to identify them by racial characteristics alone.

The two women were easiest. The Dane, Marte Schierbeck, was pure Viking, long-bodied, long-faced, and grey-eyed, with hair so fair it was almost silver. By contrast the Spaniard, Silvia Rabal, was compact and curvaceous, with huge dark eyes, full pouting lips, and a rather prominent, slightly hooked nose. Her jet-black hair was razored back above her ears and sculpted into a rose-tipped crest. The total effect was arrestingly beautiful, like some colourful exotic bird.

Of the men, a rather spidery figure with a face crumpled like an old banknote and eyes blue as the lakes of Killarney had to be the Irishman, Kevin O'Meara, while a Rembrandt burgher, solid of frame and stolid of feature, was typecast as the Dutchman, Adriaan van der Heyde. Only the German and the Italian ran counter to type, with the six-foot, blue-eyed blond turning out to be Marco Albertosi, which meant the black-haired, volatile-faced, lean-figured gondolier was Dieter Kaufmann.

Pascoe introduced himself formally, explaining Dalziel simply as his assistant. He made heavy weather of insisting on the serious nature of the affair and the absoluteness of his own authority, and by the time he finished, he had succeeded in relaxing the crew into a union of mocking anglophobia, which was precisely what he intended.

"We will start with individual interviews," said Pascoe. "Herr Kaufmann, would you come with me? Mr. Dalziel . . ."

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Pascoe had already decreed the order of interview, but Dalziel let his eyes slowly traverse the group with the speculative gaze of a sailor in a brothel. Then, with a macho aggression which should have sat ill on a man of his age, but didn't, he stabbed a huge forefinger at Silvia Rabal and said, "I'll have *her!*"

Space was short for special interview facilities so the interrogations took place in the newcomers' rooms. Rabal sat on the bed without being asked. Dalziel eased himself carefully onto a frail-looking chair and began to open the second bottle of malt.

"Drink?" he said.

"No. Why have you picked me first?" she asked in a rather harsh voice.

"Well, I said to myself, if she's the one who killed the Frog, mebbe she'll try to seduce me to keep me quiet."

The woman's huge eyes opened even wider as she ran this through her mental translator to make sure she'd got it right. Then she threw back her head and laughed, no avian screech but a full-throated Carmen laugh, sensual, husky, sending tremors down her body like the inviting ripples on a jungle pool.

"Perhaps I will have that drink, Dalziel," she said.

"Thought you might," he said, handing her a glass.

She held it close to her breast so he had to lean over her to pour. She looked up at him and breathed, "Enough." Her breath was honeyed, or more precisely spiced, as if she had been eating cinnamon and coriander. Such perfumes from a restaurant kitchen would have alarmed Dalziel, who liked his food plain dressed, but from the warm oven of this woman's mouth, they were disturbingly appetitive, setting juices running he thought had long since dried to a trickle.

He sat down heavily and the frail chair spread its legs, but held.

"Cheers," she said, lifting her glass to her lips.

"Cheers," he answered. It was time to grasp the initiative.

"Look, love," he said. "Cards on the table, that's the way I work. God gave me a fair share of good Yorkshire common sense, and that tells me you're about the least likely suspect of the lot, and *that's* the real reason I picked you first. So I can get some answers I can be sure are honest."

She said, "Thank you. I am flattered. But how do you work this out?"

"For a start, you weren't on the module, were you? You stayed on *Europa* to look after the shop, you and the Eyetie. So while the

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module party all had plenty of reason to be mucking about with their TECs in the hold, you didn't."

"And this is when this interference was done, you think?"

"Has to be, hasn't it?"

"I suppose. This fault in Emile's suit, could it not be just a fault? That American tells us nothing, just makes hints."

"No. It were deliberate interference, no doubt," said Dalziel with the technological certainty of a man who used to repair police radios with his truncheon. "Must've been done in a hurry. I mean, given time, I expect you lot are all clued up enough to have covered your tracks."

"Oh yes, I think so." She regarded him thoughtfully. "So I am in the clear because I stay on the ship? Then Marco, who stayed with me, must be clear too?"

"That depends if his legs are as pretty as yours," leered Dalziel. "But why do you ask? Would it surprise you if Marco was innocent?"

"No. I do not say that."

"But he didn't get on with Lemarque, is that it?"

"They were not good friends, no. But not so bad that he would kill!"

"How bad does that have to be for an Italian?" wondered Dalziel. "Why'd they not like each other? Rivals, were they? Or maybe they had a lovers' tiff?"

He made a limp-wristed rocking gesture.

"What do you say?" she cried indignantly. "That is not possible!"

"No? Well, there's things in these files as'd amaze you," he said, patting the pile of folders on the floor next to him.

Puzzlement, irritation, and something else besides were chasing each other across that expressive face.

"You are mistaken, I think," she said, recovering her poise. "They were rivals, yes. Each wanting to be the most macho, that is all."

"You reckon? Mebbe they didn't bother you much. I'll be interested to hear what that Danish lass made of them. She's a lot more boyish than you, might have turned them on a bit more . . ."

She looked ready to explode, recovered again and said, "Yes, if you are interested in low-temperature physics, go to her."

"No, thanks. Me, I prefer the high-temperature Latin type," he said lecherously.

She gave him a thin smile and said, "You talk a lot, Dalziel. Can you, I wonder—what is the phrase?—put your money where your mouth is?"

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"Depends where you want me to put my mouth," said Dalziel negligently. "Thanks for the offer, but. Mebbe later when I've a minute to spare, eh?" Or a week, he thought ruefully. Though there had been a time . . . At least his diversionary tactics had worked.

"Offer? What offer? You do not think . . ." Suddenly she broke into indignant Spanish.

Dalziel yawned and said, "Stick to English, luv. If a man's worth swearing at, he's worth swearing at in his own language. Now, I've read all the statements but I'm not much good at technical stuff, so mebbe you can give us a hand. First, these TECs, once they were activated in the module, you could monitor their circuits on *Europa,* is that right?"

"Yes."

"And from *Europa* this info would go back to Earth Control?"

"Yes. There is nonstop transmission of pictures and technical data from *Europa* to Earth."

"Aye," scowled Dalziel. "Made me miss *Star Trek*. But weren't there a transmission blackout from *Europa* as the module went down?"

"That is right. There was an electrical storm."

He whistled and said, "That must have been scary."

"No," she said with professional indifference. "It happens often. Fortunately it did not last long and we got pictures back in time for the big event. Emile stepping onto the moon, I mean, not . . ."

She shuddered. A sympathetic smile lit Dalziel's face like a wrecker's lantern and he said, "Don't take on, lass. Now, let's see. It were just *Europa*'s Earth transmissions that were affected? You still kept your contact with the module?"

"There was a little interference but we still got pictures."

"And technical data on the TEC circuits?"

"Yes," she snapped with the growing exasperation of the expert at being made to repeat the obvious. Dalziel scratched his nose. To him, such exasperation was the reddening skin above a boxer's eye. You pounded at it till it split.

"And there was no sign of owt wrong with Lemarque's suit? No hint that his circuits had been mucked around?"

"I have said so in my statement!" she cried. "There was nothing till the moment when he made water. Then pouf! it is finished. No one can say it was my fault! There were two of us watching. It was a systems malfunction I think, no one to blame. Who has been blaming me . . . ?"

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"Calm down, woman!" bellowed Dalziel. "You'll be gabbling away in Spanish again just now, and then where will we be? Have another drink. That's it, straight down. Now, get it into your noddle, nobody's blaming you, least of all me. So, just a couple more questions . . ."

4.

Pascoe and Dalziel had agreed to confer between interviews.

"Anything?" asked Pascoe.

"She's been bonking either the Italian or the Frog or mebbe both, and she doesn't much care for the Dane, so mebbe she got in on that act too. And she says that Albertosi and Lemarque didn't much hit it off."

"She volunteered all this?"

"I prodded a bit. And I said she weren't on my list of suspects."

"And isn't she?"

"You know me, lad. *You*'re on my list till I get the evidence to cross you off. She certainly had less chance than the others of fiddling with Lemarque's suit. Mind you, she got very agitated when she thought I was hinting she were to blame for not monitoring the TEC transmissions properly. That electrical storm checked out, did it?"

"Happens all the time, evidently. And there were two of them doing the monitoring."

"Aye. I take it, from what you're saying, you haven't clamped the Kraut in irons? Not even for flogging secrets? He did do that, I take it?"

"Oh yes, no question. He doesn't deny it."

Dalziel considered, then said gently, "Now that should be a great big plus for the Yanks' theory that he knocked the Frog off. So why do I get the feeling it's nowt of the sort?"

Pascoe regarded him blankly. Time was when Dalziel reckoned he could have followed most of his old colleague's thought processes along a broad spoor of telltale signs, but not anymore. Perhaps time had dulled his perception. Or perhaps it had honed Pascoe's control.

Then the younger man smiled and was his old self again.

"I'm glad to see the nose is getting back into shape, Andy," he said. "The truth is, I knew all about Kaufmann's relations with the East long before Druson told me. As usual, the CIA have only managed to get half a story. The more important half is that Kaufmann's been working under orders from EuroSec. He never sold anything very important, and his contacts with the Arabs plus their

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shopping lists gave us a great picture of what they were up to. We even got a lot of stuff about the Yanks through the back door!"

He laughed, inviting Dalziel to join in his amusement. But the fat man was not to be manipulated so easily.

"Sod this!" he said angrily. "Why the hell didn't you tell me this before?"

"*Need-to-know*, remember, Andy? Look, for all I knew, the Americans had got it right, Kaufmann was the killer, and I was into damage limitation. I didn't see a need to load you down with classified stuff that wasn't necessary."

Dalziel digested this, then shook his head unhappily and said, "Oh, Pete, Pete. Listen, lad, I'm far too old a dog to be learning new tricks. If this is a good old-fashioned killing because some bugger's been dipping his hand or his wick where he shouldn't, that's fine. But if it's spies and politics and that kind of crap, better beam me down to the twilight zone."

Pascoe smiled and said in a kindly tone, "I think you're mixing your programmes, Andy. And if you're going to try for pathos, better lose a bit of weight. Look, why do you think I brought you along? I've learnt enough new tricks to deal with the politics, but some of the old tricks may have gone a bit rusty. If it *is* just a good old-fashioned killing, and it could be, I'm relying on you to sort it out. You're my fail-safe, Andy. Okay? Now let's get on. I've got the Irishman and you've got the Dane. And try to hold back on the Hamlet jokes, won't you?"

Marte Schierbeck was a very different proposition from Silvia Rabal. The atmosphere had changed from Mediterranean heat to Nordic coldness, but a native Yorkshireman knows better than to trust in mere weather. He said, "Was Emile more jealous of Marco than the other way round, do you think?"

She expressed no surprise but simply asked, "What has Silvia said?"

"Does it matter?"

"The truth matters. We must tell the truth, mustn't we? Especially to policemen." She spoke with no apparent irony.

"It helps," he said. "So what about Marco, then? Was he very jealous of Emile?"

"All men are jealous of their successors. That is why they hate their sons."

"Jesus," said Dalziel.

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"There too," said the woman. "But I think what you are really asking is, 'Was he jealous enough to kill?' Perhaps. He is Italian, and their self-image permits crimes of passion."

"Not much passion in fixing a man's space suit so that first time he passes water he drops down dead," sneered Dalziel, suddenly keen to pierce this icy carapace.

It was like spitting on a glacier.

She said, "To the Latin mind, it might seem . . . apt."

Dalziel didn't reply at once and the woman, mistaking his silence, tried to help him over his repression.

"Because the electrical connection that killed him would be through his sex organ," she explained.

"Aye, lass," he said irritably. "First thing they taught me at Oxford was to know when a tart's talking dirty. I see from your file that you were the module pilot?"

"Yes. That surprises you?"

"I stopped being surprised by lady drivers a long time back," he said. "And you landed safely? No bumps?"

"No bumps." She almost smiled.

"Then what?"

"I extended the outside arm to set up the external camera to record this historic moment for posterity. Then Emile activated his TEC and entered the airlock. I opened the exit door and he began to descend. The rest you have seen."

"Why was he the first out?" asked Dalziel. "Did you draw lots, or what?"

Now she definitely smiled.

"Certainly we drew lots," she said. "Being first is important. Everyone remembers Armstrong, but who can remember the others? Can you, Mr. Dalziel?"

"Nowadays I can't remember to zip me flies till I feel a draught," said Dalziel. "Lemarque won when you drew lots, then?"

"Oh no. He did not even bother to take part. He knew it was pointless. Next day the decision came from above. He was chosen. No arguments."

"Oh aye? How'd they work that out, then?"

She said, "Who knows? But perhaps you remember from your school days, in the playground there was always one little boy or girl who had to have first turn at everything. In Europe that child is France."

"Was anything said in the module before he left?"

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"Only trivial things, I think."

"My favourites," said Dalziel.

"Emile said something like, I hope the Yankees have built a McDonald's. Even American coffee must be better than the dishwater we have to drink. Something like that."

"What do you think he was trying to say before he died?"

She shrugged and said, "Who can know?"

"Oh mer . . . How about, *Oh Marte?"* said Dalziel.

"The vowel sound is not right," she observed indifferently.

"Dying Frenchman pronouncing a Danish name," he said. "What do you want? Professor Higgins?"

She took the reference in her stride and said, "It would be touching to believe his thoughts turned to me at such a time."

Touching, thought Dalziel. Aye, mebbe. A hand on the shoulder in an identity parade, *that's* touching!

But he didn't bother to say it.

5.

"You don't look happy," said Pascoe.

"You do. Found the Paddy amusing, did you?"

"Oh, he's a broth of a boy, sure enough."

"Get you anywhere?"

Pascoe said uncertainly, "I'm not sure, I got a feeling he was trying to manipulate me . . . but you know how Irishmen love to wind up the English. Who do you fancy now. Van der Heyde or Albertosi?"

Dalziel said, "How come I suddenly get a choice? You made out the list and I'm down for first stab at the Eyetie."

"Sorry. I got worried in case you thought I was being a bit rigid, pulling rank, that sort of thing."

"Oh aye? Word of advice," said Dalziel gravely. "Pulling rank's like pulling bollocks; once you start, you'd best not let go."

"Oh aye?" mocked Pascoe. "You've been at your Rochefoucauld again, I see. Well, one good maxim deserves another. Look before you leap on top of a touchy Italian. Albertosi's psych report says he's got a short fuse. He probably wouldn't have made the trip if the other Italian nominee hadn't fallen off his scooter and cracked his skull. So tread carefully."

"No need to warn me, lad," said Dalziel. "I'm a changed man these days. No more clog dancing. It's all tights and tippytoe now, believe me!"

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"Here's something that'll make you laugh, Marco," said Dalziel. "From what's been said so far, you're looking to be the man most likely to have knocked off Emile Lemarque!"

The Italian's English was nowhere near as good as the two women's, but he had no difficulty with the idiom.

"Who has said this? What have they said?" he demanded angrily.

"General notion seems to be you and him were bonking rivals. You know, jealous of each other's success with the ladies."

"What? Me jealous of Lemarque? More chance I am jealous of a flea because he bites the woman I love!"

"Flea, you say? You want to watch where you get your women," said Dalziel kindly. "But you were both after Silvia Rabal, weren't you?"

"What? Oh yes, he bothers her. Is always flapping round her, calling her his little cockatoo, making jokes. But is all words like with all these Frenchman. Women like men who act, real men, big men. He is no bigger than she is, a midget almost! When a true man comes along, his little cockatoo soon jerks him off the nest!"

Dalziel hid a grin and said, "So what you're saying is, Lemarque wasn't worth bothering about, right? But he did bother you, didn't he? So why was that?"

Albertosi grimaced and said, "You are right. I will not lie. I did not like the Frenchman. But not because of Silvia."

"Why, then?"

"Because he has a poison tongue! Because he makes slander about me."

"They're like that, these Frogs," said Dalziel sympathetically. "What was it he said about you?"

"He said that I have injured my comrade, Giuseppe."

"Eh?"

"Giuseppe Serena. We are Italy's team for the moon shot, but only one of us will go, it is not yet decided which. Then my friend is riding back to the base on his scooter when a car forces him off the road. He is not badly injured, but bad enough to put him out of the running, you understand. Then this pig, this Frenchman, he says it is I who drive the car, I who hurt my friend so that I will be selected!"

"So you wouldn't be too unhappy about Lemarque's death?" said Dalziel.

"What do you say? I am not happy that a colleague dies, does not matter how I feel personally. But, how is it in English—pride comes,

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then a fall. He was so boasting he was to be the first to step on the moon. Only he doesn't step, he falls!"

The idea clearly amused him.

"It bothered you, did it? Him getting the prima donna's job?"

"Prima donna! That's it! That is how he acts. But what important is it, stepping on the moon? It is more than forty years since Armstrong did it. Since then many more. No, this is not a first, not a *real* first."

"No? What would you reckon is a real first, then?" asked Dalziel.

The Italian smirked knowingly but did not reply.

"All right. Let's stick to facts. You and Silvia Rabal stopped on *Europa* and watched the monitors. Did you see anything unusual?"

This seemed to amuse Albertosi. First he internalized his laughter till his whole body was shaking. Then finally it burst out in a full-throated roar.

"Please, I am sorry," gasped the Italian. "Go on. Ask your questions. It is reaction, you understand."

"All right. Silvia Rabal says that she noticed nothing unusual on the monitor."

But he was off again, turning red in his effort to suppress his amusement.

For a moment Dalziel felt nothing but a schoolteacher's exasperation in the face of a giggling adolescent. Then it began to dawn on him what this was all about.

"Oh, you dirty sod!" he said slowly. "That's it, isn't it? That was *your* first! While Lemarque and the others were in the module heading for the surface, you and Silvia were bonking in space. You dirty sod!"

He began to chuckle and a few seconds later his laughter mingled with Albertosi's in a saloon bar chorus. It took the pouring of a couple of large scotches to calm things down.

"So neither of you was watching the monitor?" said Dalziel.

"When Albertosi makes love, who watches television?" said the Italian complacently.

"And this electrical storm that knackered the transmissions to Earth was just a happy coincidence?"

"A slight adjustment of the controls," smirked Albertosi. "A man must protect a lady's modesty, hey? Down there these bureaucrats watch us all the time but this they were not going to watch."

He sipped his drink with a look of ineffable self-congratulation. Dalziel regarded him with an admiring envy which was mainly,

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though not entirely, assumed. It would be nice to puncture this inflated self-esteem, he thought, but that wasn't the name of the game. The way to a man's mind was through his pleasures.

He leaned forward and said confidentially, "Just a couple more questions, Marco. First: floating around up there, what was it like?"

6.

"Break for lunch now," said Pascoe. "Then we'll swap."

"Fine. How was the Dutchman?"

"Phlegmatic. And the Italian?"

"A bit up in the air," said Dalziel. And laughed.

The *Europa* crew ate together in their dome, segregated partly by choice, partly by command. Druson had invited Pascoe and Dalziel to join him in the central mess.

"So how's it going?" asked the American.

"Early days," said Pascoe. "The crew are naturally eager to get this over and get back to work. Would you have any objection to a limited resumption of duties? I think we ought to have at least one of our people back on *Europa*. We've tied up your man long enough."

Druson looked doubtful.

Dalziel, who was carving a steak like a Sunday joint, said, "What's up, Ed? Scared we'll pick the killer and he'll make a run for Mars?"

"Funny. Yeah, okay, why not? Anyone in mind?"

"Rabal, the Spaniard's the obvious choice. She's the pilot. Also, though I've not talked to her myself yet, Andy here reckons she's in the clear and I've never known him wrong."

You lying bastard! thought Dalziel, chewing on his steak. He got the feeling that Druson, for all his street-wisdom, was being edged into doing exactly what Pascoe wanted.

"Okay," said the American after a pause for thought. "Why not? I'll arrange for one of our pods to make the transfer. No need to play around with that steam-powered module of yours!"

Dalziel noted the transfer of irritation. You've got the feeling you've been stitched up as well, my lad, he thought. And you've no idea how or why!

Pascoe pushed aside his almost untouched omelette and stood up.

"If you'll excuse me," he said. "Couple of things to do. Back to work in, say, fifteen minutes, Andy?"

"Whatever you say," said Dalziel.

They watched him walk away, a slim, upright figure, from behind very little changed from the young detective-sergeant Dalziel had spotted signs of promise in so many years ago.

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"Hard man, your boss," opined Druson. "And in a hurry. Man in a hurry can make mistakes. Now if you'll excuse me, Andy. Anything you want, just ask, okay?"

He's getting worried about the lad wandering around free, thought Dalziel.

He said, "Aye, there's one thing you could tell me, Ed. What do you lot do about sex up here?"

Back in their dome after lunch Dalziel said, "Nice guy, Druson. Quite bright too, for a Yank."

"Indeed," said Pascoe. "This afternoon, Andy, let's whip them through at a fair old pace. Don't give them time to think. How does that sound to you as a strategy?"

It was the old Peter Pascoe's voice, easy, friendly, slightly diffident. But running through it now like a filament of high-tensile steel was the unmistakable tone of a man used to giving orders and having them obeyed.

"Sounds fine," said Dalziel.

He followed Pascoe's instructions to the letter with Kaufmann, hitting him with rapid-fire questions, all of which the German handled with the assurance of a man well grounded in the interrogative arts.

"Did you like Lemarque?" he asked finally.

"He knew his job, he did his work," answered the German.

"Aye, but did you like him?"

Kaufmann considered, then said, "As a man, no. He was like many small men, too aggressive. Always compensating for his lack of height."

"Give me an example."

"Well, I recall during training, he found out that O'Meara had been a boxer in his youth, an amateur, you understand. All the time after that, he made jokes about it, pretended to fight with him, challenged him to a bout in the gym."

"And did O'Meara take up the challenge?"

"Naturally not. Such things would not be allowed."

"So what happened?"

"Nothing," said Kaufmann. "O'Meara kept his temper, though I think it was difficult for him sometimes. Eventually Lemarque found a new target."

"Which was?"

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"Me, I think. The Germans in the wars of the last century, something like that."

"And you kept your temper too?"

"Oh yes. Sometimes I imagined what I would like to do to the troublesome little creature, but it stayed in my imagination."

"Oh aye. And can you prove that?"

The answer came unhesitatingly.

"All I can say is, if I had decided to kill him, one thing is sure. Everyone would have been quite convinced it was an accident."

"He had a point," said Dalziel. "But not just for him. How come with all their electronic know-how, whoever did it made such a pig's arse of covering their tracks?"

"We've been through this, Andy," said Pascoe. "It must have been done in a hell of a hurry. I gather there's only room for one person at a time in the *Europa*'s hold and the TV camera is blocked by the body. So the opportunity's there. But if anyone spent an unusually long time down there, it'd stick out in the recordings at Control, and it doesn't."

"Aye, well, mebbe I'll get the chance to see what it's like up there for myself before we're done," growled Dalziel.

"Still thinking we're not following proper procedure?" mocked Pascoe. "You're such a stickler! It wasn't always like that, I seem to recall. Incidentally, I checked the order they got themselves ready in. The bad news is Lemarque was last into the hold, so it could have been anyone who fixed his suit!"

"How does an Irishman get to be an astronaut?" asked Dalziel.

Kevin O'Meara cocked his head on one side in best leprechaun fashion and said, "Is it an Irish joke you're after telling?"

"Sorry?"

"Do I say, I don't know, and you say, he lights a rocket but doesn't retire till he's sixty-five? Or is it a real question?"

"That's the only sort I know."

"All right, then. Here's the story of me fascinating life and hard times. I joined the air force at sixteen, not out of any sense of patriotism, you understand. I just wanted to learn to fly so I could become a commercial airline pilot, and make a lot of money, and spend me spare time pleasuring hostesses in palatial hotels."

"Sounds fair enough to me," said Dalziel. "What happened?"

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"I grew up. Or at least I grew older. Young men should be given their heart's desires straightaway."

He threw back his head and carolled, *"Oh, the youth of the heart and the dew in the morning, you wake and they've left you without any warning."*

"Don't ring us," said Dalziel. "From your file, I see you had a longish period of sick leave about four years back."

"Is it me file you've got there? Then you'll know more about myself than I'll ever want to know."

"It was after your wife died, right?"

"Let me think. Yes now, you'll be right. Or was it after the budgie escaped? Drat this memory of mine!"

"Not much to choose between a wife and a budgie, I suppose," said Dalziel. "All bright feathers and nonstop twittering. Your missus flew away too, didn't she? Funny, that. You need to be a very cheeky sod to apply for sick leave 'cos that tart who dumped you's got herself killed."

"That's me all over," said O'Meara. "More cheek than Sister Brenda's bum, as the saying is."

"She'd run off with a Frog, hadn't she?" persisted Dalziel. "Died with him in a car accident. Terrible bloody drivers, these foreigners."

"Aha!" said O'Meara. "At last I'm getting your drift! And here's me thinking you were just showing a friendly interest! Because my wife ran off with a Frog, as you call him, every time I see a Frenchman, I feel an irresistible desire to kill him, is that it? Sure now, it's a fair cop. Except it happens in this case, the Frog she ran off with was a Belgian!"

"Let's not split hairs," said Dalziel.

"You're right. Many things I am, but not a hair-splitter. Do I get a choice of wearing the cuffs in front or behind? And what happens if I want to go to the little boys' room while I've got them on?"

"You pray no one's been mucking about with your wiring. This sick leave you had, exactly what was it that was supposed to be wrong with you?"

"Oh, women's trouble, you know the kind of thing."

Dalziel slapped the file down on his knee with a crack that made the Irishman flinch.

"End of happy hour," he snarled. "Let's have some straight answers, right?"

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"Oh God!" cried the Irishman, clenching his fists in a parody of a boxer's defences. "You don't mean you're after fighting with the gloves off, is that it? I never could abide bare fists. Bare anything else you care to name, but not the bare fists!"

Dalziel looked at him thoughtfully and said, "Yes, I'd heard summat about you being a boxer. And about the little Frog taking the piss."

"Now that's what I call an unfortunate choice of phrase," said O'Meara.

"I told you, lad. Cut the comedy! Let's just talk about you and Lemarque and the boxing ring, shall we?"

"I thought we agreed to whip this lot through double quick," said Pascoe irritably.

"Sorry. He bothered me, that one. Too many jokey answers and I got the feeling he was trying to steer me around all the time."

"So what did you end up not getting answers about that you asked questions about?"

Dalziel considered, then said, "Hard to say exactly. One thing was why he got sick leave after his wife snuffed it, but that can't have owt to do with anything, can it?"

"Unlikely. What was wrong with him, anyway?"

"Don't know. That's the point I'm making," said Dalziel heavily.

"There should have been a medical report in his file. Hang about, I've still got it here. Sorry. Let's see. Emotional trauma, blah blah; physical symptoms, insomnia, slight hypertension, blah blah; treatment, counseling and unpronounceable drugs; passed fit for duty, 7/10/06. Nothing there that's relevant, I'd say. Maybe he just doesn't like talking about that time. Stick this in his file, will you?"

Dalziel glanced at the medical report, shrugged, and said, "The bugger's still not right. How'd you do with Danish bacon? Fancy a slice?"

"I don't think so."

"You don't fancy her or you don't think she's in the frame?"

"I don't think that Miss Schierbeck would judge any man worth killing," said Pascoe. "So. One each left. We're not doing too well, Andy."

"Come on," said Dalziel. "You've scuppered the Yanks' motive for Kaufmann being the killer, haven't you?"

"Because he's a EuroSec agent? We knew that before I left Earth. It would still be very embarrassing to have to make that public in

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his defence. No, the only thing that's going to please my masters and cut the ground right from under the Americans' feet is for us to come up with the undeniably genuine perpetrator. There can't be any cover-up or fit-up. We need the real thing and we need it fast!"

After thirty minutes with Adriaan van der Heyde, Dalziel was convinced that either the Dutchman wasn't the real thing or if he was, it would take thumbscrews, rack, and Iron Maiden to prise it out of him. He'd heard Pascoe's door open and shut after only ten minutes, signalling that the commissioner was following his own precept of speed. It annoyed Dalziel to be accused of dragging his feet, annoyed him even more to suspect that perhaps it was age that was making him take so long.

"Look," he said in desperation, "let's say you're in the clear, right? Which of the others do you reckon most likely?"

The stolid Dutchman scratched his nose, then said very definitely, "Albertosi."

"Why do you say that?" asked Dalziel. "You reckon he was jealous of Lemarque?"

"Jealous? Sexually, you mean?" The Dutchman shook his head. "That's all the British can think of. Sex!"

"Must be something to do with living above sea level," said Dalziel. "All right, tulip. What do you say his motive was?"

"Revenge."

There was an unnerving certainty about the man's manner and delivery.

Even Dalziel, who was not easily impressed by the trappings of honesty, couldn't help feeling he had better pay close attention here.

"You'd best explain," he said.

The Dutchman nodded, took a deep breath, and began to speak in a measured didactic tone which for a while disguised the incredible content of his allegations.

"Lemarque was approached by a consortium who wanted his help to take over the holy-water bottling business in Lourdes. It is a multimillion-franc industry, you understand. He pretended to agree but went to the police. Unfortunately, behind this consortium are people who decree that the price of betrayal of their confidence is death. Marco Albertosi was instructed to carry out the sentence."

For a second Dalziel was reduced to a rare speechlessness. Then he burst out, "For Christ's sake, are you telling me Albertosi is a Mafia hit man?"

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"His family is Sicilian, did you know that?"

"No, I bloody didn't! Come on, lad, where's your hard evidence for all this? For *any* of it!"

"Lemarque's last words. They were incomplete."

"Oh mer . . . So?"

"He was trying to say *Omertà!"* said the Dutchman. "The Mafia's code of silence."

For a long moment Dalziel stared into van der Heyde's grave, unyielding face.

Finally he said, "Are you taking the piss?"

Another long moment, then . . .

"Yes," said van der Heyde. And his face crazed like an overfired Delft plate into a myriad lines of laughter.

7.

The pod spun round the moon in a climbing orbit and Earth swam into view like a schoolroom globe. It was easy for Dalziel to pick out Africa and India, but Yorkshire was invisible under a cloud. He felt a sharp pang of homesickness.

"Long way back, huh?" said Druson, observing him sympathetically.

"Long way to come just to hear a Dutchman crack a joke, right enough," said Dalziel.

He had rewarded van der Heyde with a glass of scotch. One glass led to another and he'd finally emerged from the interview with a feeling of childish self-satisfaction at having so blatantly ignored Pascoe's repeated instruction to hurry things along. Logically he had no cause to feel irritated when he found that Pascoe had joined Silvia Rabal in the pod taking her up to *Europa,* but he did. Even the return of Druson with the nightwatch and the message that his "boss" wanted him up there too didn't mollify him.

"Boss." He couldn't recall the last time he had acknowledged a boss, and he certainly wasn't about to start with a jumped-up detective-sergeant who'd struck lucky!

Mistaking his irritation, Druson said, "Don't take it to heart, Andy. So the German still looks the man most likely, so what? Let the politicians work it out."

"Eh? What makes you think I give a toss about politics?"

"You don't?" Druson looked at him shrewdly and said, "I almost believe you, Andy. And Commissioner Pascoe, is that how he feels too?"

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"Peter? Straight as a donkey's shaft," said Dalziel. "Too honest for his own good sometimes."

He spoke with a force he didn't quite understand the need for.

"He's done well for an honest man," observed Druson neutrally. "But at least he brought you along, so that's a point in his favour, I'd say."

Dalziel tried to work out the drift of Druson's comments as they came in to dock with *Europa,* but once aboard he needed all his concentration to keep him from bouncing around like a ball in a bingo jar. On the U.S. lunar shuttle he had been safe in the embrace of his wraparound couch, so this was his first true experience of untrammelled weightlessness. Pascoe watched with open amusement, but Silvia Rabal showed a deal of concern which Dalziel found flattering till he realized she was more worried about her delicate instruments than his delicate body.

Finally, having discovered that the basic art was to reduce his energy output by ninety percent, he gained sufficient control to follow Pascoe on a tour of the ship.

The fact that every dimension was usable made it feel surprisingly large. There were three main compartments: the bridge, which was the principal control area in the bow; the deck, which was the large central section housing most of the accommodation facilities; and the hold. This was basically a narrow cylinder walled by storage lockers, seven of which had the crew's names stencilled on them.

Dalziel almost filled the central space.

"You'd need to be a bloody contortionist to muck around with one of them TECs down here," he said, pulling at the door marked *van der Heyde.* "Locker" proved a misnomer. It was held shut only by a magnetic catch and flew open. A framed photo came floating out and he grabbed it.

"These people are highly trained pros," said Pascoe, behind, or above, or underneath him. "Also they're very fit and fairly thin. What's that you've got?"

"Family snap," said Dalziel, passing back a photo of two very plain girls and a scowling woman. "You can see why he took to space. They're allowed personal stuff, then?"

"Within reason. Weight's not the problem it was."

"Not for some," said Dalziel. "Let's have a shufti."

He began opening other lockers.

Surprisingly, only the Dutchman had brought a family photo. Perhaps he didn't trust his memory and was insuring against the

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shock of reunion. Marco Albertosi felt he could not live without a set of AC Milan's European Cup Programmes. Silvia Rabal's trust in technology did not extend to nourishment and her talisman was a soft leather bag containing sachets of camomile tea and various other pods, seeds, and dried herbs. Dalziel recalled her spicy breath and inhaled deeply. Marte Schierbeck's memento was more mysterious. An old tinderbox. Perhaps she was worried about being marooned? He opened it and found it contained a small tube of contraceptive pills. Perhaps it was who she was marooned with that bothered her? Kaufmann had brought with him a miniature score of Beethoven's *Emperor* concerto. Dalziel marvelled that these squidges could echo as music in some men's minds. Or perhaps it was just a spy's code book after all. The only other book he found was in O'Meara's locker, an ornately bound New Testament with a brass catch.

"Didn't strike me as religious," observed Dalziel.

"What's that?" said Pascoe.

"New Testament in O'Meara's locker."

"Oh, you know the priest-ridden Irish. Never shake it off. Bring it out anyway."

"Hang on. Just one to go."

It was Lemarque's and it was completely empty. Presumably it had contained nothing except the journal and that had been removed as evidence.

He gave a gentle push and floated backwards out of the hold into the deck area.

"So. One New Testament. Not quite the kind of testament I was hoping for," said Pascoe glumly.

Dalziel undid the catch and opened the book. On the flyleaf, a bookplate had been stuck headed *Holy Cross Youth Club: Award for Service.* Under this was a handwritten inscription: *To Kevin (K. O.) O'Meara. Western District featherweight champion, 1993, 1994. Well done!* It was signed, *Father Powell (1 Tim vi, 12).*

"All his success since, and this is what still matters to him!" said Pascoe reflectively.

"You reckon?" said Dalziel, turning to the First Epistle to Timothy.

The page containing chapter 6 verse 12 was folded in half and when he straightened it out he saw that either deliberately or by chance some flakes of white powder had been trapped there. Some

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of them floated free. Dalziel licked his finger and stabbed at them, then cautiously put it to his mouth.

"What are you after, Andy? Coke? Forget it. Druggies don't make it on to the space programme, believe me!"

"Why not? They let in spies and killers," said Dalziel. "It's not coke anyroad. But I know that taste . . ."

"Probably dandruff. Sorry. All right, pass it here and I'll take it back for analysis just to keep you quiet."

Dalziel, who didn't think he'd been making any unusually loud fuss, folded the page back to retain the rest of the powder. As he did so he glanced at verse 12. *Fight the good fight of faith.* No wonder young K. O. O'Meara had won his titles; he'd had the referee in his pocket.

He fastened the catch and gave Pascoe the book. The taste was still in his mouth, its source both figuratively and literally on the tip of his tongue.

Druson, who was reclining or hanging on the deck, depending how you looked at it, said, "You guys gonna be much longer?"

"As long as it takes," said Pascoe with an authoritative snap which made Dalziel smile and Druson look sour.

"What's in here?" asked Dalziel, examining a couple of doors in the bulkheads.

"Galley and the heads," said Pascoe.

"Oh, the karzies. That's right. You said they just went normal here."

"Not exactly normal," said Pascoe, opening a door. "With no gravity, you need a suction system, otherwise you could be in deep trouble."

Dalziel examined the apparatus.

"Do yourself a nasty injury with that," he opined.

He floated above the open door in silence for a while.

"Penny for them," said Pascoe.

"Still charge a penny, do they," said Dalziel. "No, I was just thinking. The Frenchie was so chuffed at being the first to land, and he'd got his little speech ready and all; and he'd not been too long gone from *Europa* where he had summat like a proper bog . . ."

"So?"

"So how come he got so desperate he had to take a leak on the ladder with the eyes of the universe on him?"

"No one would know," pointed out Pascoe.

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"*He'd* know," said Dalziel grimly. "And the data would register on the monitors up here, so they'd know. And then it would be transmitted back to Control on Earth so everyone there'd know. And you can bet your bottom dollar someone would leak the leak to the tabloids, so every bugger in the universe would know! So why'd he do it?"

"Stage fright? Or perhaps he drank something. Didn't someone mention something about coffee?"

"Aye. The Dane said he'd been moaning on about how bloody awful it was."

"There you are, then," said Pascoe dismissively. "Coffee's supposed to be pretty diuretic, isn't it?"

And the word switched on a light in Dalziel's lingual memory.

"Bugger me!" he said.

"Why?" said Pascoe with unusual facetiousness.

"That powder in the Testament, I know what it is. It's ground-down Thiabon tablets."

"You what?"

"*Thiabon*. Trade name for the latest thiazide drug. Quack put me on 'em last year for me blood pressure. They work by releasing sodium from the tissues and stimulating the kidneys to wash it out. In other words, they make you pee!"

"A lot?"

"Worse than draught lager," said Dalziel. "In coffee, I reckon they'd have most men going in half an hour. And the buildup's constant. No use crossing your legs. You've got to go!"

"What are you saying, Andy?" asked Pascoe with a frown of concentration.

"No use fixing Lemarque's suit unless you can be sure he's going to trigger the short circuit, is there? So you feed him a diuretic that you know about because you've been prescribed it yourself!"

"Hey," interposed Druson. "You're not confessing, are you, Andy? It'll take more than that to get Kaufmann off the hook."

"No," said Dalziel. "But I know someone else who suffered from mild hypertension a while back and could have been put on these pills. Hey, lass. Got a minute?"

Silvia Rabal came down from the bridge. Hair piled up in its comb and wearing a silkily thin leotard in yellow and green, she hovered before them like some tropical bird.

Dalziel said, "Before word came through that Lemarque was to be first out, who'd won when you drew lots?"

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She thought, then said, "Kevin. But I do not think anyone really believed they would let us decide ourselves. . . ."

"Believing the impossible's never bothered the Irish," said Dalziel. "So in O'Meara's mind, he should have had the honour of being first out. And besides getting the Freedom of Dublin city and draught Guinness for life, it'd mean money in the bank when it came to writing his memoirs!"

Pascoe was shaking his head, unimpressed.

"It's a pretty feeble motive for killing a man," he said. "Now if you were saying it was a daft Irish joke . . ."

"Why not?" exclaimed Dalziel, now in full flow. "Why not that too? There's nothing he can do about stopping Lemarque, but he can ruin his big moment. If the timing's right, there he'll be, standing on the ladder with all eyes on him, just about to launch into his big speech when suddenly he's got to pee. All right, he may have the nerve to carry *that* off, but not if his suit's been fixed to give him a short sharp shock along the dong? Man'd need to be Christian martyr material not to register that! In fact, with a bit of luck, he might even fall off the ladder! Great gag, eh? Only without realizing, O'Meara had fixed it so that all the electronics in the TEC would jam, and the joke goes sour, and the poor bloody Frog is lying dead."

Pascoe regarded him doubtfully, hopefully, longingly, like a pagan on the brink of conversion, and Dalziel's brain started working overtime, drawing fragile threads together in an effort to plait a cord that would bear the other's soul up to heaven.

"Someone, Kaufmann I think it was, said something about Lemarque twitting O'Meara about being a boxer. Suppose he knew that his nickname as a lad had been K.O.? Mebbe he'd taken a peek in yon Testament. And suppose what he scribbled in his journal wasn't *Ka is getting angry,* but *Ko is getting angry.* And if he was on the alert, mebbe when he felt his bladder filling up at a suspicious rate, he recalled the awful coffee he'd drunk and knew where to lay the blame. What he said just before he died, *Oh mer* . . . what he was trying to say was *O'Meara!*"

It wasn't much, but a man in search of salvation will make do with a candle if he doesn't get offered a blinding light.

Pascoe said with fervent gratitude, "Andy, how have I managed without you all this time? I felt there was something about O'Meara when I talked to him. Mr. Druson, I need to get back to the Village straightaway."

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Druson was looking as if his side's twenty-point lead had been clawed back in the fourth quarter and now in the dying seconds of the game he was watching the opposition shaping to kick a field goal.

"Come on, you guys!" he mocked, trying for time-out. "I like baloney, but this is ridiculous! Let's just look at the facts here . . ."

"The only fact that need concern you, Colonel, is that we are getting into that pod and that during the flight there will be no talking with your base other than essential technical exchanges. I'm sure you understand me."

Pascoe's tone was courteous, his voice quiet. But it was the quietness of deep space, which can boil a man's blood in millisecs if he challenges it unprotected.

Druson clearly believed he had that protection, for now he substituted belligerence for mockery.

"Now listen here. No limey cop gives me orders *anywhere* and especially not round the moon. Christ almighty, it's taken you guys half a century to get here in this junk heap. We've been *living* here for more than—"

Pascoe cut across him like Zorro's sword through a candle.

"Colonel Druson, you are presently on Federation territory and I would be quite within my rights to arrest you and fly the pod back myself with you under restraint. Oh yes, I could do it, believe me. Nor would my powers diminish on the moon's surface, which is by UN accord international territory where my authority is at least equal with that of your own commander, who, incidentally, has received instructions from your president to extend me all facilities and full cooperation. I hardly think you want to be at the centre of a diplomatic incident which would wipe a mere accidental death right off our television screens. *Do you?"*

Now for the first time Dalziel admitted to himself how far beyond him Pascoe had gone. He'd always known that the sky was the limit for the lad, but somehow, somewhere, a step had been taken that he'd not noticed, a small step which had taken his protégé into territory where not even the mightiest of leaps could have taken Dalziel.

Druson too was taken by surprise, but like Dalziel he was a pragmatist.

"Okay, okay, Commissioner," he said, holding up his hands in mock surrender. "I'm not taking on the UN, believe me."

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"Thank you," said Pascoe. "Andy, perhaps you'd stay here till another pod fetches you. It would be a bit crowded for the three of us, I think."

He smiled as he spoke, but his eyes flickered to Silvia Rabal and his finger touched his lips. The message was clear. Dalziel was to make sure the Spaniard made no contact with the village.

Dalziel had seen no particular evidence of the kind of group loyalty that might have her radioing a warning, but Pascoe was right to be cautious. All the same, Dalziel felt a little disgruntled that having done all the nose-work, he wasn't going to be in at the kill.

Still, as Druson had just acknowledged, it was no use kicking against a brick wall. Best to lean back against it and enjoy the sun on your face.

He watched the pod detach itself from *Europa,* then he turned to Silvia Rabal, who was relaxing against a bulkhead with her legs tucked up beneath her, looking more like an exotic bird than ever.

"Right, luv," he said, beaming broadly. "Now what can an old vulture like me and a bright little cockatoo like you do to pass the time? With a bit of luck, mebbe we'll get an electrical storm, eh?"

8.

It was the youngster who'd brought the whisky who piloted Dalziel back to the Village. He called Dalziel "pops" a couple of times, but the fat man was not in the mood to respond and most of the journey passed in silence.

The first person he saw as he climbed from the pod was Druson, whose face told him all.

"Seems the Shamrock folded like a zed-bed," said the colonel. "Full admission, signed, sealed, and delivered. Just the way you called it, Andy."

"Oh aye? You might look more pleased," said Dalziel.

"You too," said Druson, regarding him shrewdly. "Time for a snort?"

"Best not," said Dalziel, to his own surprise as much as the American's. "I'll need to find out what the lad's planning."

Druson smiled and said, "Last I saw of your *lad,* he was talking to the two congressmen and the air force general he'd just dumped off the next shuttle. I never heard a guy sound so polite as he says *Up yours, fella!* So it looks like it's goodbye time, Andy. And I guess I'd better chuck in a congratulations. You two are a real class act.

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Though I'm still not sure if it's Laurel and Hardy or Svengali and Trilby."

"Is that a compliment?" wondered Dalziel. "It's about time you buggers learnt to speak plain English. Cheers anyway, Ed. And thanks for the scotch."

They shook hands and Dalziel returned to his quarters. Pascoe was already there with his suitcase open on the bed.

"That was quick," said Dalziel.

"It was like I said, Andy. He was longing to get it off his chest, but it seemed daft to confess when he didn't have to. All it needed was the realization that we had firm evidence. That was down almost entirely to you, Andy. You were brilliant! Fancy a job in the Justice Department?"

"No, thanks," said Dalziel. "Good beer doesn't travel. So all's well, eh? No aggro at the summit after all."

"The Irish will feel a mite embarrassed but they're used to that," said Pascoe. "Main thing is, poor Lemarque's unfortunate death won't affect the outcome. It'll be down to honest political debate."

"Oh aye? What was that thing they taught us about in grammar lessons, when two things are put together that don't make proper sense? Like *freezing fire.* Or *southern beer."*

"An oxymoron, you mean."

"Aye, yon's the bugger. Well, honest political debate sounds like one of them to me. And all them as claims they engage in it, I reckon they're oxy-bloody-morons too!"

Pascoe laughed and said, "You don't change, Andy. Thank God! Come on. Don't hang about. I'm going to have a quick shower. All this frantic activity's made me sweat. You get yourself packed. We're on our way home in half an hour!"

They rose from the moon in a smooth accelerating orbit. As they slipped round for the second time, beneath them they glimpsed the heavy squat bulk of *Europa,* like some beautifully preserved steam engine on display outside a modern jet station.

Then their flight path straightened out and they sped like a silver arrow towards the gold of Earth.

Dalziel raised himself on his couch. O'Meara was lying to his left, his eyes closed, his breath shallow, a childlike relaxation smoothing the crinkled face.

"Looks as innocent as a newborn baby, doesn't he?" said Pascoe, who occupied the couch to Dalziel's right.

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"Aye, he does," said Dalziel. "Mebbe that's because he is."

"I'm sorry?"

Dalziel turned to face the younger man and said in an exaggerated whisper, "Safe to talk now, is it?"

Pascoe thought of looking puzzled, changed his mind, grinned, and said, "Quite safe. Clever of you to spot it."

"They brought me Glenmorangie," said Dalziel. "I'd not mentioned any brand till we got to our rooms and I complained that Druson had forgotten. I checked it out again at lunch. Druson was listening all right. And you knew, but decided not to warn me."

Pascoe didn't deny it.

"Sorry," he said. "Didn't see any point. We weren't going to be saying anything we cared about them hearing, were we?"

Dalziel considered, then said, "No, lad. We weren't. You because you're a clever bugger and knew they were listening. And me because . . ."

"Because what, Andy?" prompted Pascoe with lively interest.

"Because, not knowing, I'd just come across as a simple old copper doing his job the way he'd always done it."

"I don't think I'm quite with you," said Pascoe.

"Oh yes you are. You're only hoping you're not," said Dalziel. "Let me spell it out for you, lad. Here's what I think really happened back there. When the Frog snuffed it, the Yanks checked out his TEC. They found a malfunction but no definite sign of outside interference, so it looked like a bug had got into that particular circuit. Tragic accident. Trouble was, the suit was an American design and they don't like looking silly. So mebbe the first idea was to muck the circuits up a bit to make it look like a maintenance fault, not a design fault. Then someone, Ed Druson most likely, had a better idea. How about setting the French and the Germans at each other's throats by pinning this on Kaufmann? They'd known for some time he was flogging stuff to the Arabs, and were watching for the best chance to use this info to maximum advantage. A dead Frog blackmailer, a murdering Kraut spy; all they needed was a bit of evidence. So they mucked about with the suit to make the fault look deliberate, planted yon microprobe thing in Kaufmann's locker, leaked the news to the press, and sat back."

"And the entry in Lemarque's journal? They forged that too, I suppose?"

"Probably not. Too dangerous. That was just a stroke of luck. God knows what it really means."

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Pascoe leaned back on his couch, shaking his head in a parody of wonder.

"Andy, this is fascinating! Have you been doing a lot of reading in your retirement? Fantasy fiction perhaps?"

"Don't get comic with me, lad," snarled Dalziel. "And don't think you can pull that rank crap you got away with on Druson either. You may be a federal bloody commissioner, but me, I'm a private citizen, and I can recollect you telling me more than once in that preachy tone of thine that in England at least being a private citizen outranks any level of public service you care to mention. Or have you changed your mind about that too?"

"No," said Pascoe quietly. "I'm sorry. Go on."

"I was going to, with or without your permission," observed Dalziel. "Now your lot, being clever college-educated buggers like yourself, soon sussed out what had really happened, only there was no way to prove it. So someone *really* clever came up with the solution—let's accept what the Yanks say about Lemarque's death being deliberate, but let's fit somebody else up instead!"

"And how were we going to manage that, Andy?"

"Well, you had a head start, knowing that Kaufmann worked for EuroSec, which cut the ground from under the Yanks when it came to motive. But there was still a question of concrete evidence."

"Concrete? Ah, I see. Like the good old days of slipping half a brick into a suspect's pocket?"

"Oh, you've come a long way from that, Peter," said Dalziel. "Anyone can plant a half-brick. Or a New Testament for that matter. But you needed more evidence. You needed an admission, and that requires a long, strong lever."

"Which I just happened to have about my person?"

"That's where it would have to be, wouldn't it?" said Dalziel. "I mean, if the Yanks had got us bugged, they'd not be shy about searching our luggage, would they? Though what they'd have made of a harmless list of names and addresses, I'm not sure."

Pascoe's hand went involuntarily to his breast pocket and Dalziel laughed.

"It's all right, lad. I put it back after I'd taken a shufti while you were in the shower. I knew there had to be something, and it had to be in writing so you could slip it over to O'Meara while you were interrogating him. Then, after giving him time to take this list in, there'd likely be another piece of paper with his instructions on like, *You're going to confess to killing Emile Lemarque, or else!*"

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"Or else what, Andy?" inquired Pascoe. "You're losing me."

"Oh, I think I may have done that already," said Dalziel coldly. "I can make a stab at guessing what that list meant, but why should I bother when I can get it from the horse's mouth. So how about it, Paddy? I've never known an Irishman keep quiet for so long!"

He poked O'Meara savagely in the ribs and he opened his bright blue eyes and abandoned his pretence of sleep.

"Now there you are, Andy, me old love," he said brightly. "I should have known a man with a face like an old potato couldn't be as thick as he looks! No, no, that's enough of the punching. One thing I learned as a young boxer was not to fight outside me weight. And I got right out of my weight when I was a boy, believe me. Oh, the company I kept, you'd not believe it. Wild men, terrible men, men who drank Brit blood for breakfast and ate Proddy flesh for tea. I was just a messenger, a lookout, a tea-boy, nothing heavy, and I thought I'd put it all behind me when I joined up, and I was glad to be getting away from it all, believe me. But those boys don't forget so easily, and the top and the bottom of it is they came after me to do my old mates a few favours, like giving details of the guard routine at my training depot and looking the other way when I was on sentry so they could get into the arms store.

"Now I was young, but not so young I didn't know that once I started that road, I'd be on it forever. So, I told our security officer. He was a real gem. He did a deal with the Brits, passing on all information on condition they did the cleaning-up job on their side of the border and pointed the finger a long way from me. A couple of days later, I don't know if it was a cock-up or policy, but the Brits laid an ambush and when the shooting stopped, all the wild men were dead, and me, I was both very guilt-ridden and very relieved, for this meant I was completely in the clear. Or so I thought. Only what I didn't reckon on was that full details of the affair would be carefully recorded in some great computer file where it would lie sleeping for all these years till Prince Charming here came along and woke it with a kiss!"

"He's good at that," said Dalziel. "And these names and addresses? They'd be relatives of the men who got killed? And members of your own family?"

"That's right. And if the first lot ever found out who bubbled their menfolk . . . they've got long memories back in Ireland, and they don't forgive. So now you know all about me, Mr. Dalziel. And now you know too what nice company you've been keeping."

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Dalziel turned to Pascoe and said, "Oh Peter, Peter, what have they done to you?"

"Come on, Andy!" protested Pascoe, looking uncomfortable. "You've cut a hell of a lot of corners in your time, you can't deny it. And we've only got O'Meara's word for it that he turned his old chums in the first time they asked for his help. God knows what mayhem he contributed to before he got cold feet! And what'll happen to him now? He already has a deal tied up with a publisher, and this will do him no harm at all. An Irish jape that went tragically wrong. Punishment enough from his own conscience, sentence suspended. Advance sales astronomical, serialized in the *Spheroid,* he buys a castle in Killarney, and he and his family live happily ever after. I'm practically doing him a favour!"

Dalziel had started shaking his huge head halfway through Pascoe's plaintive self-justification, but he didn't speak till it had run its course.

"Oh Pete, Pete," he said now. "Christ, but you've started running slow since you've not had me to wind you up! You don't really imagine I'm bothered about this poor Paddy and his tribal troubles, do you?"

"So why the shaken head, the plummeting sigh, the heartfelt reproach?" asked Pascoe, trying unsuccessfully for lightness.

"Because in all my years of cutting corners, as you put it," said Dalziel heavily, "I did a lot of chancy things, but I never screwed up a mate. I badgered you, and I bullied you, and I buggered you about something rotten. But I never took advantage of you, or made a dickhead out of you, or fobbed you off with a load of lies. Did I?"

"Well," said Pascoe uncertainly, "there were a couple of . . ."

"Did I?"

"Okay, no. In principle, in essence, at the end of the day, no, you didn't."

"So why've you done it to me, lad? Why've I spent the last few days with your hand up my arse working my jaw hinges like Charlie McCarthy? Don't answer that. I'll tell you. It wasn't my sodding expertise and independence you wanted. With your clout, you could have had any bright young thing in the game at your service, spouting your script with a will. But why risk an act when for no extra cost you can have a genuine geriatric, who would trip over the truth with his walking frame and leave the Yanks too bothered and bewildered to cry, 'Foul!' Was it all your plan, Pete? Every bit of it? Or did some other genius set it off and you just threw me in as a

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makeweight to make sure you got your share of the glory?"

His voice never rose above a murmur, but its pace increased and its timbre changed, as waters that start soft and slow become harsh with menace when the meadows give way to rock and the stream starts accelerating towards the cataract.

O'Meara said, "Oh dear. If you two girls are going to quarrel, I really am going to sleep."

And sinking back, he closed his eyes once more.

Pascoe too had slumped back into his couch. He did not speak for a long time, then said simply, "Andy, you're absolutely right. What I did was unforgivable. I don't know how . . ."

His voice failed.

Dalziel said, "It's a tightrope, lad. The higher you go, the more dangerous it gets. Me, I got as far as I could safely. Beyond that, I didn't fancy the trip. One small step in the wrong direction and you can end up bent, or you can end up using people. People that matter, I mean. Your mates. Where I was was right for me. Anything more would have been giving a face-lift to a cuddy's backside. But I always thought: There's one bugger I know that I'll trust to go all the way; who'll be able to look up without getting delusions and down without getting giddy; who'll not change to fit changes; who'll not let new honours get more important than old mates . . ."

Now it was his voice that died away.

When Pascoe finally spoke, his voice was tight with restraint.

"Andy, I'm sorry. More sorry than ever I've been about anything. I've let you down and I know it. God knows if I can hope to put things right with you, but I'll try, I promise I'll try. But there's a more pressing problem even than that. I've got to ask you something, not as a friend or even an ex-friend, but as a Federal Justice Commissioner. Andy, you've got knowledge, possibly dangerous knowledge, about O'Meara, about Kaufmann, about the fit-up, about everything.

"Andy, what are you going to do about it?"

What are you going to do about it?

Dalziel rubbed a hand like an eclipse across his face.

This was the second time that day he'd been asked this question.

Then as now he had not given an immediate answer, though he doubted if the delay would have the same result now as then.

His doubts had started long before their arrival on the moon; as soon as Pascoe had telephoned him, in fact. He was no Holmes or

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Poirot to be hauled out of retirement to solve one last all-baffling case. He was a pensioned-off bobby, suffering from gout, flatulence, distiller's droop, and the monstrous regiment of visiting nurses.

So what the hell was the lad playing at?

He hadn't worked it out straightaway but he'd soon worked out the role Pascoe wanted him to play. The old steam-age detective puffing his way to the preordained terminus! And to start with, he'd really enjoyed playing it. Of course in the old days he'd have done things his way. They'd have visited *Europa* to get the feel of the ship before interrogating the suspects. But his resistance to Pascoe had been token. It was the lad's game, so play to his rules. And the lad had been right. It was pointless planting his clues till he was sure the victim of the fit-up was going to play ball. Mind you, it had been rather offensive the way he'd shovelled them at Dalziel thereafter, as if he really did think his old taskmaster was past it! Best thing that could be said for him was he was working to a timetable. If they hadn't caught this shuttle, they'd have had to wait forty-eight hours for the next, and that would have given the Yanks time to regroup and counterattack O'Meara with a better offer.

Once Pascoe had got the famous stubby finger to point at the Irishman, all he had to do was get back to the Village as quickly as possible and go through the prearranged charade of accusation and confession, with the Yanks listening in helplessly. And preferably without a fat old steam-age cop sitting in the corner, nebbing in with awkward questions.

So the cunning bastard had left him on *Europa,* with the alleged task of making sure Silvia Rabal didn't broadcast anything of what had taken place, this from a ship which was pumping out sound and pictures twenty-four hours of the day!

At this stage he still wasn't sure what was going off. Mebbe Pascoe genuinely believed O'Meara was the perpetrator and had at last learned a lesson Dalziel had once despaired of teaching him, that like faith without works, belief without evidence got you nowhere, so where was the harm in giving God a helping hand?

But it rankled not to be admitted to the plan, if that *was* the plan.

And also, like a stuffed owl, the case against O'Meara *looked* right, but it didn't fly.

With these thoughts in his mind he had watched the pod depart, then turned to look at Silvia Rabal, no stuffed owl this but a living and exotic creature of the air, and matters forensic were flushed from his mind.

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"Right, luv," he said. "Now what can an old vulture like me and a bright little cockatoo like you do to pass the time? With a bit of luck, mebbe we'll get an electrical storm, eh?"

Even though his tone was nostalgically playful rather than lewdly insinuating, it was not the most gallant of things to say, and had her reaction been scornful abuse, mocking indifference, or even righteous indignation, he would have accepted it as his due. But what rounded those huge dark eyes was surprise; more than surprise, shock; in fact, more than shock—fear!

And suddenly, in a flash—but not at all sudden in truth, for this was where the subtle independent microcircuits of his mind had been directing him while Pascoe was busy with spanner and wrench at the pistons and cogs of his consciousness—he saw the stuffed owl topple off its perch to be replaced by warm, living, tremulous . . .

"Tell me, luv," he said. "What's French for cockatoo?"

She went floating away up into the bridge, fluttering her supple hands over the bank of control lights, and for a moment both terrifying and exhilarating he thought she might be going to send them blasting off into the depths of space.

But then she turned and floated back to face him.

She said, "*Kakatoès*. He called me Ka when we were . . . in private. But you know this, and more. From the start I saw you were the dangerous one."

She spoke almost flatteringly. She was also speaking unnecessarily freely considering all those TV cameras.

He said warningly, "Mebbe we should . . ." What? There was nowhere private to go! But she took his meaning and laughed, making a flapping gesture with her hands.

"It is all right. No witnesses. These electrical storms are sometimes convenient, hey?"

"You mean you've fixed it?" A light dawned. "Of course, it was you who fixed it last time, not Marco. It was *your* idea."

"Of course. I guessed Marco might boast, but he's too macho to tell it was not his initiative!"

"Why'd you need the blackout?"

"If Control had spotted a fault in Emile's TEC circuits during the module descent, they might have aborted the landing and spoilt my plan."

She was bloody cool, thought Dalziel. Another thought occurred to him and he said, "But weren't the suits tested earlier in the voyage out?"

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"Of those involved in the landing, yes."

She regarded him expectantly. It was as if she wanted him to justify her decision to black out the cameras and confront him directly. Though what she hoped to gain by that . . .

As often happens with sight, taking his eye off a sought-after object brought it into view.

He said, "I saw the files. You and Lemarque are the same height, so your suits would be much the same. You fixed your suit at your leisure, didn't you? You had time to do a real job on it, not this botched-up job the Yanks claimed. Then all you had to do was swap the suits. And the name strips. That's why his was out of line. You had to do that in a hurry down in the hold. I should have remembered the smell."

"Smell?"

"In Lemarque's suit. That spicy smell. I thought it were a funny kind of aftershave . . ."

And now the memory of her spiced breath and the contents of the leather pouch in her locker came together and he said, "What was it you put in his coffee to make him pee? Dandelion juice? Used to call them piss-the-beds when I were a lad."

"Dandelion, pansy, burdock, black briony—just a very little of the briony, it is very poisonous, very dangerous to those who do not know how to use it. When I hear he is dead, at first I thought: My God, I have used too much and killed him!"

Her face paled with the memory of shock. Dalziel scratched his nose reflectively and said, "Aye, but you *did* kill him, lass."

"No!" she protested indignantly. "He dies by accident! All I do is give him a shock, make him ridiculous in front of the whole world! You must believe me, Dalziel. You must!"

She looked at him beseechingly and he said, "Must I? I'll need to know a lot more before I can go along with that. First thing I need to know is why you wanted to electrify his goolies anyway."

She scowled and said, "He was a rat! He turned from me to that Danish icicle. Well, that was his right. I grow tired of men too. But this rat wanted us both, he is insatiable. Even that I don't mind. But he hid it from me and he did not hide it from her, and that I mind very much! She knew I was being tricked and found it amusing. They screw with their minds, these Scands. But it was his fault, so I decided he must be punished and this idea came. It seemed to me—what is your phrase? Poetical justice! That's it. To pain him in the places he valued most. His vanity and his sex! But pain only,

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not death. You cannot laugh at a dead man, can you?"

This sounded like a clinching argument to Dalziel.

"So you're saying it was a fault in the TEC design that killed him? But if you hadn't interfered with it, that fault would never have shown up."

"My interference was a possible fault, therefore it could occur, so this other fault was the real fault," she flashed.

"Mebbe that makes sense in Spanish," he said. "So you definitely left it looking like an accidental fault?"

"Of course! You think I am stupid?" she cried. "So what has happened? How is it you are looking for a killer? And why is Kevin accused? How can that idiot who comes with you believe such a stupidity? Kevin will prove his innocence, won't he?"

He missed the implication of this for the moment as his mind tried to rearrange everything he knew into something he could understand. And as the picture emerged like a negative in developing fluid, his slablike face grew cold and hard as a rock on a wintry fell.

"I'd not put money on it, luv," he said. "In fact, I'd bet that yon idiot who comes with me has probably got O'Meara's full and frank confession in his pocket already."

"Confession? Why should he confess?"

"I don't know yet. But one thing's for sure. Somehow it'll seem a better option for him than not confessing."

She digested this.

"You think so? Then in fact, I will be helping Kevin by keeping quiet, is that not so?"

He grinned at her ingenuity, and also at her naiveté.

"Bit late to be thinking of keeping quiet when you've just coughed your guts out to me, luv," he said cheerfully.

"Coughed? Oh yes. I understand." She smiled at him with wide-eyed innocence. "But I do not understand why you say I have coughed? There is no one here. Just you and me and the electrical storm. No witnesses."

She gestured at the useless TV eyes.

Dalziel shook his head and showed his gums in a chimpanzee's smile.

"Good try, luv," he said. "But they don't like us using a notebook and a stubby pencil anymore."

From his breast pocket he took a flat black-plastic case with a silver grille along one edge, held it up to his ear, pressed a button,

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and listened to the resulting faint hiss with every appearance of satisfaction.

"That's grand," he said, switching off. "I was a bit worried in case the electrical storm had affected the recording quality."

She stared at him, baffled, unsure, as he replaced the instrument in his pocket. He met her stare full on, raised his eyebrows as if to invite her comment. She moistened her lips nervously. At least it started as nervousness, but the tiny pink tongue flickering round the full red lips carried a sensual jolt like an electric shock, and when she saw his reaction, she smiled and let the tongue slowly repeat the soft moist orbit.

And then it was he heard that question for the first time.

"So, tell me, Dalziel," she said. "What are you going to do about it?"

They were facing each other across the deck, resting against the bulkheads. If there was an *up* and a *down* on the *Europa,* this configuration came closest to what Dalziel thought of as "standing up." Perhaps that's what made him take the step.

One small step.

Indeed, hardly that. On Earth it would have been a mere shuffling of the feet, a rather nervous adjustment of a man's weight as he wondered what the hell to do next.

Only here there was no weight to adjust, and the small forward movement of the left foot provoked a counterbalancing backward movement of the right; and as this was against the bulkhead, it caused an equal and opposite reaction, thus doubling his forward movement; and now his arms swung back to grab for support, but, finding nothing to get hold of, merely struck hard against the surface, and this energy too was translated into forward momentum.

And so it was that one small step for Dalziel became in a split second a mighty leap.

She came to meet him. In her eyes a deal had been offered and enthusiastically accepted, and she was no niggard in a bargain. There was perhaps a moment when she became aware that the thin black-plastic device spinning in the asteroid belt of clothing that soon surrounded them was not a recorder but an electric razor, but by then it was far too late to abort the blastoff. Far too late . . . far, far too late . . .

"Andy? *Andy!* Are you okay?"

"What? Oh aye. Sorry. What was it you said?"

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"I thought we'd lost you there," said Pascoe. "I asked you: What are you going to do about it?"

Dalziel regarded Pascoe with the exasperated affection he had bestowed on him almost from their first encounter. He'd thought then that mebbe the bugger was too clever for his own good, and now he'd got the firm evidence. The lad had sat down and worked out everything, method, motive, the lot. Jealous resentment, a jape that went wrong, the use of a diuretic in the coffee, everything had been there in his theoretical model. Only, that was all it had been to Pascoe. A model theatre into which he could dangle his puppets and watch them dance as he pulled their strings. He hadn't been able to take the next small step and see that if a model works, then mebbe the reality works too, and perhaps there was no need of puppets, because there was a real culprit out there, waiting to be caught.

And because he was so obsessed by clever trickery, he had thought to authenticate it all by dropping fat old Andy Dalziel into the play, a figure so obviously real that not even the suspicious and distrustful Druson could believe he was anyone's puppet.

So what *was* he going to do? In a way, the ultimate disappointment was that the lad needed to ask. Dalziel didn't believe in practising everything he preached, but the golden rule he'd recently reproached Pascoe with was twenty-two carat. You don't drop your mates in it.

And anyway, whether he'd intended it or not, a deal had been struck back there on *Europa*. "All right," he growled. "For Christ's sake, take that hangdog look off your face before the RSPCA puts you down. I'll keep stumm. And I'll forgive you. It's my own fault, I suppose. Teach a fledgling to fly and you've got to expect he'll crap on you some day. But I'm not going to kiss and make up, if that's what you're after!"

Pascoe's face split in a smile of undisguised, uncontrived relief.

"I should have known better than to mess around with you, Andy," he said. "I thought . . . well, to tell the truth, I thought you'd be so rusty, I wouldn't have any bother. And I wanted to see you again, and to work with you. Honestly, that was part of it. But I underestimated that nose of yours. It must be the weightlessness that got it back working at full power."

"Not just the nose," muttered Dalziel.

"Sorry?"

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"Nowt. Summat I meant to ask. *Europa,* it doesn't just mean Europe, does it?"

"No. It's the name of a Phoenician princess who got ravished by Zeus in the form of a bull."

"Oh aye. I thought I recollected something like that," said Dalziel with a certain complacency.

Pascoe turned his head to look back to the moon. They were far too distant now to see the orbiting spaceships, and the moon itself had declined from a world to a silver apple hanging in space.

"I can't believe I've really been there," he said dreamily. "I used to look up at it when I was a kid and have these fantasies. Now I'll be able to look up and remember . . . but I doubt if I'll believe what I remember. What about you, Andy?"

"Oh, I'll believe right enough," said Dalziel, who was lying back with his eyes shut, thinking of Nurse Montague and a nice little surprise he might be bringing home for her. "Like yon Yank said, one small step for a man, one mighty jump for an old copper."

"Leap."

"Eh?"

"Leap," repeated Pascoe with that stern pedantry which neither age nor advancement had been able to rid him of. "I think you'll find it was *one giant leap,* not *one mighty jump.*"

"You speak for yourself, lad," said Andrew Dalziel.

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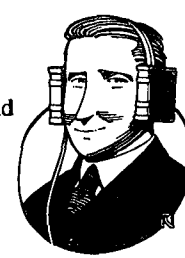

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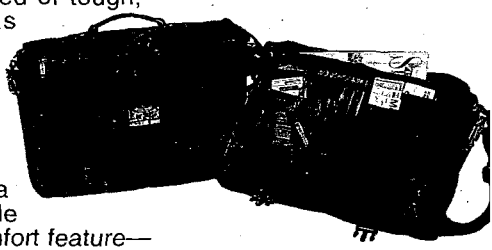

or carry the bag by the durable handle. This black Locomotor Bag lets you keep it all together whenever you are on the go. #A2057—$26.9 ($5.75).

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